



PLAYWRIGHT'S PROGRESS:

O'NEILL

AND THE CRITICS

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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

SCOTT, FORESMAN AND COMPANY

CHICAGO ATLANTA DALLAS PALO ALTO FAIR LAWN, N.J.

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## PREFACE

*Despite the international prominence of Eugene O'Neill, there is little collected critical material about his work, except for the large and valuable compendium, edited by Oscar Cargill and others, entitled O'Neill and His Plays (1961). No anthology of O'Neill criticism from both the daily press and the weekly or monthly magazines exists in a form suitable for use by the student of American literature or drama who seeks a fairly coherent picture of the acceptance and rejection of this unusual man and his unorthodox plays. It is hoped that this small volume supplies that need.*

*It is assumed that Playwright's Progress will be used in connection with introductory studies of American literature or American drama, and the individual teacher will find different methods of use for different situations. With a view to stimulating the student to further investigation of O'Neill and to assisting both student and teacher, a short chronology of O'Neill's life, a list of topics for report, and a short bibliography of readily available biographical and critical materials are appended to the text.*

*The source of each item—including author, newspaper or periodical, and date—is indicated uniformly throughout the book. Original page numbers are indicated between slashes within the text. In the case of daily newspapers, however, page numbers have been omitted because reviews often appeared on different pages of the various daily editions or, in some cases, on two entirely different days. Since reviews often contain typographical errors that are due to the haste with which newspapers are necessarily assembled, I have corrected the most obvious errors, others have been retained and are followed by sic. Footnotes have been added to clarify oblique references to persons, historical events, and foreign phrases.*

*I wish to thank the Photographic Service of the New York Public Library for its prompt assistance in sending me copies from that institution's magnificent periodical and newspaper collection. Further appreciation goes to the editorial staff at Scott, Foresman and Company for assistance rendered in preparing copy, despite my long absence from the continental United States. To my student assistant, Miss Sally Schlobohm, I also extend thanks for her help in assembling and typing the material.*

*Jordan Y. Miller*



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## INTRODUCTION

In what may ultimately be considered his greatest play, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, Eugene O'Neill presents an overpowering picture of his tragedy-ridden family, written, as he explained in the dedication, to his wife Carlotta, "in tears and blood." Although this drama of terrifyingly intense love-hatred within a close family group is more than mere soul-purging autobiography, it does give us, in the characterization of Edmund Tyrone, a vivid look at the turning point in O'Neill's young and dissipated life, when in 1912 he was forced by respiratory illness into an extended period of quiet isolation from the mad world in which he had been living. We are shown a restless mind, driven by the unstable soul of a sensitive young man desperately seeking an outlet for his latent artistic talents, which had been hitherto deprived of articulation by the many factors of unsettled family background and personal irresponsibility.

*Long Day's Journey Into Night*—in many ways the climax of O'Neill's career as a dramatic artist—shows, then, the climactic period when O'Neill was compelled to make a decision as to where his future lay. His ultimate determination to make something of his life after his release from a Connecticut tuberculosis sanitarium in May of 1913 was summarized simply and directly in his letter applying for admission to Harvard the next year. Writing to Professor George Pierce Baker he said flatly, "I want to be an artist or nothing."

O'Neill most certainly did strive toward being an artist. His extremely sensitive nature and his predilection for alcohol in his early years (later, after his third marriage, he became a teetotaler) often slowed but never stopped—nor even, for that matter, seriously interfered with—his devotion to his work and his subsequent steady progress toward becoming by all odds America's most outstanding playwright. Whether or not he became the greatest one depends in large degree upon one's individual preference, but his impact upon the American and world theatres was as permanent as it was emphatic. More than thirty plays appeared on New York stages over the forty-two years that elapsed from the first Provincetown Wharf Theatre production of *Bound East for Cardiff* in 1916 to the Theatre Guild's display of *A Touch of the Poet* in 1958. No other American dramatist has ever come close to equaling this singular feat.

A reading of O'Neill's plays quickly demonstrates that this playwright's one consistency was an artistic and stylistic inconsistency and that this unevenness of quality was a discouraging flaw. A parallel reading of significant criticism of the plays reveals the many frustrations of the conscientious reviewer who wished to evaluate fairly O'Neill's artistic position in American dramatic literature but who found the playwright's accomplishments constantly fluctuating between monumental achievement and abysmal failure. Furthermore, O'Neill's plays seldom failed to call forth strong emotional responses from the critics who wrote of them. One had to be either for or against them; it was virtually impossible to remain safely balanced in the middle, for the simple reason that O'Neill's dramatic subjects were never routine, never ordinary. They demanded emotional response—and invariably received it. After 1920, when O'Neill emerged as a major artistic power, he drew some of the most extravagant critical praise and most contemptuous scorn ever directed toward a serious modern dramatist.

There is little need to review all the hundreds of items written about O'Neill in order to gain an accurate impression of his work. By considering a limited but well-chosen few, *Playwright's Progress* gives a fairly definite critical profile of O'Neill, outlining in chronological order the critical response to his plays, beginning with the earliest one-act sea plays and continuing through the posthumous revivals and revaluations of his plays in the 1960's. This volume includes comments on successes and failures alike—sometimes three different viewpoints on a single play—in an effort to offer as much critical balance as possible. In addition, longer selections, marking the chronological periods into which O'Neill's work conveniently falls, provide more inclusive, if not always more balanced, evaluations. While some selections are excellent examples of skilled professional judgment, others expose some amazingly inept expressions of opinion which show how far afield a critic can sometimes roam when confronted with a theme he cannot, or does not choose to, comprehend. Taken together, then, the items reprinted here not only reveal O'Neill's career as a dramatist but open to scrutiny the whole field of dramatic criticism.

## ARTISTIC APPRENTICESHIP 1913 – 1919

O'Neill began his serious venture into playwriting in his twenty-fifth year, during the fifteen or sixteen months in 1913–1914 that he spent at a Connecticut boarding house while his health mended (see Chronology, p. 180). Between frequent therapeutic swims in Long Island Sound, he composed and sent off to New York producers a steady stream of fairly bad one-act plays. In complete ignorance of accepted procedures, he assumed that mailing the manuscripts directly to recognized names in show business was all that was necessary, the fact that all of the plays were returned without the slightest consideration by anybody never seemed to dissuade him at all. Confident in the worth of what he wrote, O'Neill faithfully registered each play, and the copyright office recorded such titles as *Wife for a Life*, *Bread and Butter*, *Abortion*, and *The Movie Man*.

This youthful determination did not pass wholly unnoticed. An O'Neill family friend, author-critic Clayton Hamilton, persuaded O'Neill's reluctant father that his son possessed sufficient talent to merit recognition in published form. The result was a small volume entitled *Thirst and Other One-Act Plays*, published in August of 1914. Financed entirely by James O'Neill, it contained five one-acters: *Fog*, *Recklessness*, *Thirst*, *The Web*, and *Warnings*. In an article on the relative merits of publishing plays, Hamilton wrote

This writer's favourite mood is that of horror. He deals with grim and ghastly situations that would become intolerable if they were protracted beyond the limits of a single sudden act. He seems to be familiar with the sea, for three of these five plays deal with terrors that attend the tragedy of ship-wreck. He shows a keen sense of the reactions of character under stress of violent emotion; and his dialogue is almost brutal in its power.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Clayton Hamilton, "A Shelf of Printed Plays," *The Bookman*, 41 (April 1915), 182.

O'Neill disowned the book in his later years, and it became a collector's item.

In September 1914, O'Neill was accepted into Professor George Pierce Baker's playwriting class at Harvard. In the atmosphere of the class's awed respect for the established playwrights of the day, such as Edward Sheldon and Eugene Walter, O'Neill's iconoclastic approach, expressed in both discussion and scripts, made him stand out, as one classmate later wrote, "like an oyster in a lunchroom stew." Nervous, shy, reserved, and impatient with the rigid doctrines of the class, O'Neill departed in the spring of 1915 to begin a career that would carry his name and fame around the world.

During this early apprentice period, from the time of his release from the sanitarium in 1913 until the sudden arrival of fame early in 1920, O'Neill wrote at least twenty-five plays. Seventeen of them were never produced, in fact, a good portion of them have not survived at all. Judging by available evidence, it is indeed fortunate that they have disappeared, for they were clearly the effort of a writer not yet at home in the dramatic medium. On the other hand, judging by those that do exist, it is equally clear that the undisciplined talent carried a potential heretofore unknown on the American stage.

When O'Neill's plays were first produced in the off-Broadway theatres of his day, reviewers from the New York daily papers gave them scant attention. It was not necessarily the quality of the plays or the lack of well-known names that kept the professional reviewers away; it was merely that the struggling little theatre groups in the Bohemian atmosphere of Greenwich Village were not presenting the kind of material that appealed to the crass commercialism of the uptown theatres, which were still producing the artificial, well-made farces, melodramas, and problem plays of the late nineteenth century. The made-over brownstone houses and stables that served as playhouses at the south end of Manhattan Island offered little appeal to the ordinary theatre-goer. This is, in O'Neill's case, unfortunate, for it is extremely difficult to discover much published evaluation of his earliest productions. Luckily, however, critics such as Burns Mantle of the *Mail*, Alexander Woollcott of the *Times*, and Heywood Brown of the *Tribune* attended the Washington Square and the tiny Playwrights' Theatre of the Provincetown Players, so a few reports do exist that show him a force to be reckoned with.

## THE PLAYS OF 1913 - 1919

### *Written*

#### **1913-1914**

*Wife for a Life* The earliest recorded O'Neill play. Unproduced. Published 1950 in *Lost Plays of Eugene O'Neill*.

*Bread and Butter* Contents unknown.

*Children of the Sea* Contents unknown.

*Abortion* Published in *Lost Plays*.

*The Movie Man* Published in *Lost Plays*.

*Fog, Recklessness, Thirst, The Web, Warnings* All published 1914 in *Thirst and Other One-Act Plays*

*Servitude* Published in *Lost Plays*

*Bound East for Cardiff* The first play produced by the Provincetown Players (Wharf Theatre), Summer 1916

### **1915**

*The Sniper* Published in *Lost Plays*

*Belshazzar* Contents unknown

*A Knock at the Door* Contents unknown

*The Personal Equation* Early version entitled *The Second Engineer* Contents unknown

### **1916–1917**

*Before Breakfast*

*In the Zone*

*Atrocity* Contents unknown

*The G A N (or The G A M)* Contents unknown

*Now I Ask You* Contents unknown

*The Long Voyage Home*

*Ile*

*The Moon of the Caribbees*

### **1918**

*Beyond the Horizon*

*Till We Meet* Contents unknown

*The Rope*

*The Dreamy Kid* Published in *Theatre Arts*, January 1920

*Where the Cross Is Made*

### **1919**

*Chris Christopherson* Original version of *Anna Christie*

*The Straw*

*Exorcism* Never published, but received one production

*Honor Among the Bradleys* Contents unknown

*The Trumpets* Contents unknown

### **First Performances:\***

#### **1916**

*Bound East for Cardiff* Summer, Wharf Theatre, Provincetown

*Thirst* Summer, Wharf Theatre, Provincetown

*Before Breakfast* December 1, The Playwrights' Theatre

#### **1917**

*Fog* January 5, The Playwrights' Theatre

*The Sniper* February 16, The Playwrights' Theatre

*In the Zone* October 31, Comedy Theatre (Washington Square Players)

\*First performances of the plays in this and succeeding lists were in New York unless otherwise specified —Ed



*The Long Voyage Home* November 2, The Playwrights' Theatre

*Ile* November 30, The Playwrights' Theatre

**1918**

*The Rope* April 26, The Playwrights' Theatre

*Where the Cross Is Made* November 22, The Playwrights' Theatre

*The Moon of the Caribbees* December 20, The Playwrights' Theatre

**1919**

*The Dreamy Kid* October 31, The Playwrights' Theatre

#### REVIEWS

### ***Bound East for Cardiff***

*Heywood Broun*

As we understand it, an experiment is something which turns cinders into gold dust or explodes with a fearful crash and odor. In this sense the Provincetown Players have established a most efficient experimental theatre. Some of the explosions can be heard even when the plays are read miles away from Macdougall Street.

There is only a little gold dust, but then there never is much gold dust. The Provincetown plays seem to have been written by a group of remarkably divergent ability.

Different in key [from another play in the Provincetown repertory], but second in interest, comes "Bound East for Cardiff," by Eugene G. O'Neill. Here is a play which owes more to the creation of mood and atmosphere than to any fundamentally interesting idea or sudden twist of plot. "Bound East for Cardiff" merely shows the death of a sailor in the fore-castle of a British tramp on a foggy night. The appeal lies in the successful approximation of true talk in such a speech as the one where the dying sailor fretfully complains: "Why should it be a rotten night like this, with that damn whistle blowin' and people snorin' all around? I wish the stars was out, and the moon, too, I c'd lie out on deck and look at them, and it'd make it easier to go—somehow."

Approximation, rather than faithful reproduction, must be the aim of the dramatist who deals with the looser talking sort of folk. Obviously, it is impossible to set down the conversation of sailors word for word. And yet it is possible to make their talk sound real, as in the speech we have quoted, or unreal, as in the scene where Driscoll, "a red-haired giant, with the battered features of a prize-fighter," refers to one of his boon companions as a "devil-may-care rake av a man." This is false, not so much because the phrase is obviously one which would not be heard from the mouth of a sailor, but because the spirit is false.

Such slips are few in the play. Eugene O'Neill has written several short

plays about the sea, and is probably familiar with that subject. At any rate, he strikes a rich vein, the old Kipling vein, in the bit where the dying man and his pal mull over the times they used to have "The moving pictures in Barracas? Some class to them, d'yuh remember?" And they talk of sounds in Paseo Colon, and smells in La Plata, rows in Singapore and sprees in Port Said, to say nothing of the fight on a dock in Cape Town, when knives were drawn.

Appropriately enough, there is a touch of sentiment about the pleasant-spoken barmaid at the Red Stork, in Cardiff. Perhaps it is of her that Yank is thinking just before he dies, when he gulps at the dipper of water and gasps "I wish this was a pint of beer."

### *In the Zone*

*Anonymous*

The Washington Square Players last night resumed their task of providing for their patrons at the Comedy Theatre the kind of entertainment which they believe might be neglected by actors with less subtle appreciation and understanding of dramatic art. The formula on which their first bill of the season was constructed remained the same as before—four sharply contrasted one-act pieces—and the same as before also remained the style of the acting which still disdains such elementary requirements of the art as clear diction, knowledge of the symbols of expression and authority of manner.

The Players do not like to be called amateurs. But now that they have been organized three years, they ought soon to cultivate a method, both individually and in the ensemble, which distinguishes them from amateurs. A few of the older members seemed reasonably sure of themselves last night, but there were others who were badly at sea even in their simple little plays.

The tense playlet [of the four] was "In the Zone," by Eugene O'Neill. The length of the dialogue was out of proportion to the substance, but the story, laid in the forecabin of a munitions ship passing through the submarine zone, contrived to create some real suspense. The sailors suspected one of their number of being a spy and fancied that a package found in his bunk was an infernal machine. It was discovered to contain letters from an old sweetheart, who had put him aside because he was a drunkard. Frederick Roland acted the suspect with commendable restraint and feeling. Arthur Hohl also scored, but nearly any one might have played the other roles as well.

### *Ile*

*Burns Mantle*

Director Conrow's fourth bill of the season at the Greenwich Village Theatre, disclosed to the bobbed-hair neighbors and visiting friends last night, consists of three short plays.

One is a poetic bit streaked with comedy and called "A Maid of France," written by the Englishman, Harold Bughouse. Another is a tale of the sea by Eugene, son of James O'Neill, the actor, entitled "Ile," and the third a thirty-minute Schnitzler satire (stretched to forty-five minutes last night), concerning the familiar affairs of the actor lover and called "The Big Scene."

The O'Neill sketch is another of those atmospheric bits, set in the cabin of a whaler caught in the ice in the Behring sea. The crew, its time worked out, is about to mutiny unless the captain gives up his unsuccessful search for "Ile" and starts for home. He, determined to stick it out, cowers his men, but weakens before the pleading of his young wife, who has accompanied him on the trip and is high to madness after endless months spent in gazing out over the great stretch of ice while she dreams of the home she has left. But just as he agrees to give up the cruise open water is reported to the northward, a school of whales is spouting off the starboard bow and he decides to stay. Whereupon the disappointed wife's mind gives way and he leaves her babbling incoherently as he takes to the boats. Not so good, nor so vivid, as the author's "In the Zone," being a bit obviously theatrical. But still holding claim to some part of his unusual gift for realism and red-blooded characterization.

### **Exorcism**

*Alexander Woolcott*

The current bill of the Provincetown Players is interesting all the way through, with its climax provided in an uncommonly good one-act play by Eugene O'Neill. Absence of any comment here on their two preceding programs was due neither to indolence, the remoteness of Macdougall Street, nor hardening of the artistic curiosity as to what could and might be done in the side streets of New York. These earlier bills were merely too dank and dull for the details to survive in the memory of your correspondent.

There lingers there now only a confused impression of dark cellars, fitful candle-light and voices lifted in the gloom—usually wailing something like, "O Moishe, Moishe!" or words to that effect. Of course, there was always the refreshing sight of Miss Djuna Barnes, bounding up and down the centre aisle like an artless antelope—a compensating privilege accorded to the Provincetown Playwrights on first nights, presumably in lieu of royalties. Even so, the indifferent material, made especially depressing by an addiction to the gloaming school of production, provided two uncomfortable evenings which only emphasized the penitential quality of the benches serving there as seats—benches which, as the third wit of our time has said, should really be upholstered with a long-felt want.

This new O'Neill play exhibits a young man of a substantial and correct family who is so full of contempt for it that he has walked out head high and fallen into the gutter. He is down to the dregs of existence when the play

begins, equally revolted by the character of his life and by the prospect of a surrendering, prodigal-son return. He is so plagued by the questioning devils within him that even a fresh start on a farm out West has no appeal to him. So he swallows poison, placidly says, "That's over," and curls up on his miserable bed.

Twenty-four hours elapse and you find him stretched out under the delighted ministrations of two drunken friends, who are bibulously pleased with themselves for having yanked him back from the brink of the grave. You see him slowly reviving, only to find the ugly, inescapable world still closing in around him, with its intolerable tedium represented by the two souses, each still telling, over and over again, his favorite story. The suicide comes back to find everything wearisomely the same—everything except himself. Slowly he realizes that he is different—that the devils have gone out of him. Slowly it dawns on him that, when a fellow tries hard to kill himself and seems to fail, the effect is quite as though he had succeeded. The person revived is a new person, the life ahead is life in a new world. With a real appetite for that world you leave him all worked up about that beckoning farm out West.

One of the most important factors in O'Neill's force as a playwright is visible in "Exorcism," and that is the surplus creative energy which enables him, after the essential structure of a play has been attended to, to people it with original and distinctive characters, brought into the theatre with the breath of life in them and backgrounds that ask no aid from the man with the brush.

It is common enough in our theatre to find a single vivid character stalking amid puppets—witness "Erstwhile Susan," or "Grumpy," or "Lightnin'." But it is decidedly uncommon to find the secondary rôles alive and real and individual. The average playwright is quite exhausted when he has worked out his plot and done a bit of portraiture in the leading rôle. When other figures are needed, he feels it quite all right to take the mannequins from the property room, dust them off, paint them different colors, and set them to work. He feels he has fairly outdone himself if he provides one with red hair, another with an English accent and a third, say, with a rheumatic walk. Of course, the favorite outburst of characterization consists in giving one of the puppets cocaine, a dramatic drug which furnishes the maximum of emotion, facial expression and gesture with the minimum of thought behind it. But with O'Neill, the smallest rôles have a certain sovereignty. In an O'Neill play, no one can play "straight," as the actors have it. All the parts are clearly what theatre folk call character parts, as if, poor dears, there were really any other kind.

O'Neill's aptitude for sketching in a figure in a few telling speeches has been apparent from the first of his plays. Witness, for example, the Captain in "Bound East for Cardiff." As more and more of his plays have come to light, the mere abundance of this extra energy grows interesting. Consider both "Beyond the Horizon" and "Exorcism," which in this respect are unmatched by any other plays of the season, save the two which have established St. John Ervine—"John Ferguson" and "Jane Clegg."

## THE SEARCH FOR THEME AND FORM: 1920-1925

As indicated by the foregoing brief samples of criticism before 1920, the published comment on O'Neill's early plays is disappointingly scant. It did not take long, however, for the young playwright to attract flocks of professional critics to his plays as he abandoned the little one-act dramas of "atmosphere" and began to attack with vigor—and, at times, a kind of wild abandon—all manner of theme and subject, presented in a wide variety of dramatic forms.

In the six-year period from 1920 through 1925, O'Neill wrote and saw produced in New York an average of two plays a year. In 1920 three full-length plays made their appearance, in addition to the very early one-act *Exorcism* (see review on p. 6), and the abortive road tryout of what was later to become *Anna Christie*. In 1924 three more long plays were staged, plus an unsuccessful pantomime adaptation of Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and a "package" production of four one-act sea plays under the collective title *S S Glencairn*. As many as five plays by Eugene O'Neill could be seen somewhere in New York during a single season. There had never before been anything in the American theatre quite like this prodigious output, and there will never, in all likelihood, be anything like it again.

This outpouring created two problems for the critics. First, nobody could discover how to categorize O'Neill artistically. To many, it seemed that *Anna Christie* and *Beyond the Horizon*, together with the familiar sea plays, placed him firmly in the camp of the realists. But the steaming jungles of *The Emperor Jones* and the stokehole of *The Hairy Ape* marked him as one of the first, and best, American expressionists. In contrast, however, the almost

clinical analysis of human agony, with offstage screams of childbirth in *The First Man* and Strindbergian marital hell in *Welded*, seemed to indicate that he had profound naturalistic tendencies. And in further contrast, the way his characters struggled for some kind of identity within the world and in relation to the forces of God and nature around them seemed to mark O'Neill as a mystic.

Second, O'Neill became the despair of those who wanted to praise him (as well as the delight of those who found him without value) because of the extremely erratic nature and uneven quality of his work. He could never settle down to a uniform quality of dramaturgy. When his plays were good, they were excellent, when they were bad, they were simply terrible. It was perfectly clear that the energy the playwright put into his plays was being used in an irritatingly heavy-handed manner that forced his characters to speak interminably in a cumbersome, uninspiring prose and to reiterate their points over and over again. The plays plowed clumsily along, sometimes crushing everything in sight, sometimes unearthing sheer brilliance. But consistency was never apparent, and it was discouragingly difficult to evaluate Eugene O'Neill as a contributing artist in a developing American literary drama.

The reviews in the following section are divided into two groups: failures and successes. There are only four plays in the first group; reviews of *Gold* (1921) and *The Ancient Mariner* (1924) are not included since critics consistently found these plays to be of very little worth. The plays included in the second group marked O'Neill as a significant writer of dramatic literature and gave signs of the important works to come. Even so, the reviews do not uniformly offer praise. As we look back at the critical remarks and at the plays themselves, however, we can plainly see that O'Neill was going through a period of intense searching for valid theme and form. While producing some incredibly shoddy goods, he was, at the same time, putting out some very exciting art.

## THE PLAYS OF 1920 - 1925

### *Written:*

#### **1920**

##### *Gold*

*The Ole Devil* Contents unknown. Apparently part of it went into the final version of *Anna Christie*.

##### *The Emperor Jones*

##### *Diff'rent*

##### *Anna Christie*

#### **1921**

##### *The Fountain*

*The Oldest Man* Original title of *The First Man*

##### *The Hairy Ape*

**1922**

*Welded*

*The Ancient Mariner*

**1923**

*All God's Chillun Got Wings*

**1924**

*Desire Under the Elms*

**1925**

*Marco Millions*

*The Great God Brown*

***First Performances:***

**1920**

*Beyond the Horizon* February 2, Morosco Theatre Won Pulitzer Prize

*Chris Christopherson* March 8, Atlantic City The tryout failed, and the play was withdrawn and rewritten as *Anna Christie*

*Exorcism* March 26, The Playwrights' Theatre

*The Emperor Jones* November 3, The Playwrights' Theatre

*Diff'rent* December 27, The Playwrights' Theatre

**1921**

*Gold* June 1, Frazee Theatre

*Anna Christie* November 2, Vanderbilt Theatre

*The Straw* November 10, Greenwich Village Theatre

**1922**

*The First Man* March 4, Neighborhood Playhouse

*The Hairy Ape* March 9, The Playwrights' Theatre

**1924**

*Welded* March 17, Thirty-ninth Street Theatre

*The Ancient Mariner* April 6, Provincetown Playhouse

*All God's Chillun Got Wings* May 15, Provincetown Playhouse

*S S Glencairn* August 14, Provincetown Playhouse

*Desire Under the Elms* November 11, Greenwich Village Theatre

**1925**

*The Fountain* December 10, Greenwich Village Theatre

REVIEWS

***Diff'rent***

*Kenneth Macgowan*

This is a year of triumphs for the Provincetown Players For six seasons, they have plodded along in their little improvised playhouse off Washington Square, mounting much that was bad, along with some excellent plays by

Susan Glaspell and other strangers to the Broadway theatres, which have found their way to almost all the "little theatres" and amateur groups of the country. The chief distinction of the Provincetown Players, however, besides a rare determination to stick to their job of giving the American author a chance, has been the discovery and development of the most powerful and adept playwright that America has ever produced, Eugene O'Neill. Perhaps he has not yet written the finest of American plays, though his tragedy of tuberculosis, *The Straw*,<sup>1</sup> not yet produced, seems in manuscript a piece of fine power. But in everything O'Neill has done, there is a type of true, clear, and exciting dialogue such as no other American writes or has written in the theatre. This year his powers have come closer than before to fruition and have carried the Provincetown Players through half of what promises to be a vastly successful season. *The Emperor Jones* proved so popular that it was continued at their little playhouse for over a month, then carried uptown for special matinées, and finally pushed into the evening bill of a theatre where commercial successes have proved very rare. Now comes another O'Neill play which has won almost as much renown and which also /80/ has been carried up to Broadway for the delectation of its matinée-goers.

I am loathe to confess that I cannot feel quite the enthusiasm for *Diff'rent* that it has aroused in even the most critical who have seen it. It is written with all O'Neill's command of dialogue. Its construction is excellent, and its story moving. Yet because of its material and because of *The Emperor Jones*, it is disappointing.

*Diff'rent* is the story of a woman who refused love and marriage because of a very tiny and excusable irregularity in a sailor's life. In the first of the two acts of the play, we come upon the girl and her lover in the sitting-room of her parents' home. We sense the fine fiber that runs through her, we learn of her illusions, which make her, as she says, "diff'rent" from the other girls of the sea-port town. Presently comes a rumor of a joke played upon her lover while he was in command of a sailing vessel in the South Seas, a joke which involved one of those strong, handsome women of the tropics, so much celebrated today in the fact and fiction of the Gauguin revival. It is an episode which leaves the so-called virtue of the man in doubt, but which certainly places his human qualities and his fundamental decency and devotion in a most favorable light. But the girl is "diff'rent." She sends him off. In the second act, thirty years later, we find the couple still unmarried, the man still devoted to her, but the woman seeking elsewhere some part of the pleasures of youth that are slipping from her. She pants, she dresses in absurdly youthful fashion, she pouts and snickers, and she makes love openly and shamelessly to an unmitigated young rotter, who promises to marry her in order to get money from her. The outcome is a double tragedy. The old lover hangs himself when he learns of her degrading match, and when the woman learns this and finds that the boy has been tricking her, she makes the same end of herself.

<sup>1</sup>For a review of *The Straw*, see Robert Allerton Parker's article on pp. 30-31 — Ed.



Only the close of the play, the double hanging, seems at all inept, and even for this there is defense. Certainly the characters are drawn with the greatest skill, and the language of every-day is made powerful and pregnant with drama. The development of the principals and of certain subsidiary characters over the thirty years is well managed. The talk of the rotter is usually real and convincing, ordinarily such young villains are the merest sticks. Yet the unescapable impression of anyone who remembers *The Emperor Jones* and its fine imaginative quality, its color, and its spiritual power, and compares it with *Diff'rent*, must be that the newer play is a step backward for its author. It is no more than a powerful document on the pathology of a woman in her forties. For those /81/ who care for "messages," there is, of course, a vigorous and healthful attack upon the puritanism that eats away so much of the creative happiness of life, but, in the end, *Diff'rent* remains a "thriller" upon a sex topic uncommonly well handled.

There is one passage in the first act of *Diff'rent* which gives one a sense of what fine possibilities there are in O'Neill for a continuance of the remarkable strain which gives *The Emperor Jones* its distinction. The descriptions of the tropical islands, the naked women in the sun, and the heat and beauty of those Southern seas, are full of the strong and uplifting lyricism which in *The Emperor Jones* takes the shape of a dark and beautiful and terrifying dirge. In such stuff there is the future of the theatre. There lie imagination and vision based upon reality, but springing upward into the strange and mysterious reaches of the soul which modern psychology has opened for us.

The playing, as well as the plays of the Provincetown Players, shows a considerable improvement this year. There is no such performance in *Diff'rent* as Charles Gilpin gives in *The Emperor Jones*, yet the cast is pretty evenly effective, and there is, at least, one exceedingly good piece of acting. It is not, unfortunately, in the part of the woman. This role is far more difficult than Juliet, for it calls not alone for an actress who can look sixteen and have the knowledge and emotions of maturity, but for an actress who can also simulate forty-six, and forty-six trying to be young. Mary Blair plays the first act with real skill and charm. In the second act, she does surprisingly well with what is to her almost impossible material, but still falls far short of the necessary illusion. James Light plays the momentarily inconstant lover with a good deal of success. The honors, however, go to Charles Ellis as the degenerate youth of the last act. His work is thoroughly professional in finish and detail. It goes beyond all impersonations of young wastrels that have appeared on Broadway by keeping an aspect of more or less normal and good-looking manhood, while indicating spiritual degradation, cruelty, and lasciviousness by tone and glance. In this one part, Ellis comes forward as the best actor that the Provincetown Players have ever numbered among their permanent company /82/

## ***The First Man***

*Alan Dale*

Instead of the subtleties of tuberculosis, Eugene O'Neill, in "The First Man," that had its first performance at the Neighborhood Theatre, in Grand street, Saturday night, introduced us to the mysteries of obstetrics. It was a pleasing attempt to theatricalize the process of maternity that seemed to be a trifle new to the stage.

When it comes to registering theatrical "suspense" and thrill by the horrible shrieks of a woman in travail I confess that the theatre, to my mind, has lost its poise. Besides the fact that physical suffering is always an unpardonable thing to show on the stage, there was the other fact that in this case it was perfectly unnecessary and merely morbidly introduced.

In "The First Man" the energetic Mr. O'Neill—looking fondly toward his cults—has given us a husband who, learning that he was about to become a father, "cut up" very rough. Perhaps that is neither new to life nor to the theatre, but in this case the disinclination to fatherhood was merely due to the circumstance that the man was about to set forth on a scientific expedition. He wanted his wife with him. Hence hearing of her maternal plans, he raved and ranted all over the stage.

This was supposed to make out his case. He loathed the coming child. He loathed all children. Why? Simply because the kid barred him from his expedition. Surely the ingenious Mr. O'Neill might have made out a clearer cause for the parental antipathy. It seemed ludicrously insufficient. It was so weak that the whole fabric tumbled.

The play was filled with agony and talk. Such TALK! For no particular reason the poor victim of maternity was "suspected" by all her husband's relatives of being unfaithful. They "suspected" that Bigelow, the man's best friend, was the father of the child.

However, the child was born.

We all suffered. It was a terrible moment. We were there, intruding. It was painful and not in the least thrilling. One can find such thrills in a lying-in institution perhaps. The theatre is a trifle out of place for such exhibits. The birth of the child brought the death of the mother. In the last act, all the relatives had returned from her funeral garbed in clothes of woe. And then—the husband was made aware of their suspicions. The memory of the dead wife was assailed.

"The First Man" was badly acted. Augustin Duncan never even touched the agony of the man he portrayed. He was false, insincere, theatrical, awkward and unconvincing. He made the part grotesque. It had acting possibilities that were never realized. The same may be said for Margaret Mower, who played the suffering wife with such placidity that she got on one's nerves. Also it was usually difficult to understand what she said. Marjorie Vonnegut was exceedingly amateurish, although she had THE part of the play. Maie L.

Day was the most felicitous member of the company, with Eva Condon second and Frederic Burt as the accused friend gave a capital performance

It was a long and tedious play. It was just about as agreeable as the evening dedicated to it. But it undoubtedly will be hailed as a masterpiece. That is pretty certain.

### ***Welded***

*James B. Hittaker*

Says Dramatist Eugene O'Neill of the passion love, which subject he treated last night in the Thirty-ninth Street Theatre in the play named "Welded": "You gotta learn to like it." He generalized, but he excepted himself.

We are beginning now to believe that O'Neill has not learned anything very well. His "Emperor Jones" didn't like his luck, his man of "Beyond the Horizon" didn't like his job, "The Hairy Ape" didn't like his friends, and now, in "Welded," his gospel of dislike touches its climax, and, we trust, its end, in the man who didn't like his love.

To his pair of lovers, represented in the play by Doris Keane and Jacob Ben Ami, O'Neill plays the role of a bilious cupid with poison-tipped arrows. These two are plagued by ecstasies which end in sobs. They are welded in embraces which are hurtful half-Nelsons.

Mr. O'Neill's thesis is that the soft passion is most hellish when it has been civilized by the ceremony of marriage. When the guests are sped, the cat put out and Darby and Joan are legally alone—then, divulges Mr. O'Neill, is when the fight begins.

With a grand air of exploring a bleak shore as pioneer, O'Neill steers his story steadily in the direction of woe, with brisk and wrathful blizzards belly-ing all its sails. Mr. [Jacob] Ben Ami, in the course of this romance, is shipwrecked into the arms of a siren of the streets. Miss [Doris] Keane fetches up, bedraggled, in a bachelor apartment which she fills with the sound of her lamentations.

For these two have had an argument in their own home and like two Noras where only one grew before, have both rushed out into the night to tell it to the neighbors.

In his first act, O'Neill ventured higher in the social scale than is his wont. A good sign, we thought, when the curtain rose on a neat studio and Miss Keane, lovely in a black gown and a rich Spanish shawl which margined her white shoulders, for O'Neill's fancy has hitherto been exiled among louts, and it was cheering to find his two protagonists an actress and an author.

We have always wanted to see what refinement would happen to O'Neill if he were brought out of his accustomed grog shops into a china shop. Alas, he is a bull in both places.

A small cast of four share among themselves the miseries of "Welded,"

and each has noble opportunities to spit out between clenched teeth Mr O'Neill's most effective curses of a world gone wrong

Mr O'Neill, campaigning for defeat, reckoned with all elements but one. That was the loveliness of his star, which cannot be blighted At the end of the play's mischances Miss Keane's proud head was neither bloody nor bowed. By her beauty the downhearted message of the play was misspelled victory

### ***The Fountain***

*Gilbert W Gabriel*

It is told by Oviedo of the early Spanish Conquerors that, sometimes when they were captured by the Indians, molten gold was poured down their throats, with the mocking command to "Eat, eat and take your fill" The same metal of a precious indigestible vocabulary is forced upon you by "The Fountain," Eugene O'Neill's romance of one of those Conquistadores, which began to unfold at the Greenwich Village last night Utter dyspepsia of mind and spirit is the least punishment inflicted by this trial by scenery

"The Fountain," as has been told here in the past, is no new venture—on the author's part, at any rate Mr. O'Neill wrote it all of a few years ago and sold it in turn to two other managerial organizations, both of which made wiser solutions of the bargain, forfeited their advances, and have no doubt freely added their blessings on the production as undertaken downtown by that triumvirate of which Mr O'Neill is himself a member And, if blessings avail, "The Fountain" needs a sea of them

For here, in spite of the noble mood in which it is cast, and the occasional uprising of passages of beauty to break its grieving calmness, is an evening of poor rewards, extended much beyond its decent measure, inactive and too parlous, played almost wretchedly, and affording little consolation other than Mr Robert Edmond Jones's handsome return to romantic designs for his setting and costumes Like so many Village ventures, it is earnestly elaborate in a small way, much stress upon the pictures it can conjure

Here, for once, is this foremost of our playwrights (a salute which not even "The Fountain" can make me retract) trekking a region hitherto strange to his talents, the jungle of the imaginative He himself raises the signpost of a preface to assure you that the Ponce De Leon of his New World epic is a creature of fancy, not of history, and that "'The Fountain' is not morbid realism"

Of his forty-five or so dramatic opuses this is by no means the worst Yet it must rank among the most troubled, and might well have been met with that word which does honor to so many of the plays on his list—that brave word "destroyed." For it outtalks its aspiration, repeats its meanings with the meager melancholy of a barrel organ, and slithers too often in that peculiarly O'Neill territory where the sublime is watered by the maudlin.

There have been tragedies enough, Lord knows, about the Spanish conquerors. Two generations ago no self-respecting American librettist would use other heroes than Cortez and Pizarro. They tell of one famous opera where there were as many horses in the cast as there were Spaniards and Indians combined, and that, so fertile were the results of this equine assemblage, the boards of the stage began soon to put forth leaves!

But then, says Mr. O'Neill, his "The Fountain" is only incidentally concerned with America. Indians he has in it—a goose fleshed, gaudily grease painted lot of scriveners, from the looks of them—and many hallowed names of state and church in the Era of Discovery, including Christopher Columbus. But Ponce de Leon and his coming to Florida, that land which has passed from the Spanish brethren to the Marx Brothers, are merely pegs on which to drape the pity of man's everlasting legend of a spring of eternal youth. They are voluminous drapes, and they draggle.

One scene, perhaps the finest in the romance, shows Columbus's flagship on the second voyage. It ends in the devout fervor of a "Te Deum" at sight of land, with the sun suddenly and inexplicably rising from the west. But this and the several episodes of parley with the Indians have about them that bliss of grouping and coloration which used to characterize such tableaux on the sides of the old time moving vans.

There are frequently sunny bits of architecture, featuring the symbolic importance of an actual fountain and running water. A penultimate delirium of the dying Ponce de Leon brings in through gleaming jets and a dreamy blueness as many persons as harassed the sleep of Richard III. And at last, in a spurt of exquisite phrasing, comes the key to the futility of all the old discoverer's quest, when, in his agony, he cries aloud. "Oh, fountain of eternity, drink back this drop, my soul!"

To Walter Huston, who played so powerfully in Mr. O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms," falls this massy part of Ponce de Leon. But he does roughly with it, his voice apparently incapable of anything but loud and soft and loud again, his sincerity no talisman at all against awkwardness. But, at that, it is a part which taxes the audience's patience as much as the spokesman's throat. And quite all the performing—except, perhaps, Crane Wilbur's—is rudderless and sometimes ridiculous.

But it is a bit sardonic that of the hero on whose grave was inscribed,

"Here rest the bones of a Lion,  
Mightier in deeds than in name,"

a play should be made of words, words, and more words.

## ***Beyond the Horizon***

*Heywood Brown*

Eugene O'Neill's "Beyond the Horizon," which was produced at a special matinee at the Morosco Theatre yesterday, is a significant and interesting play by a young author who does not as yet know all the tricks. Fortunately, he therefore avoids many of the conventional shoddy stratagems, but at the same time there is an occasional clumsiness which mars his fine intent and achievement. Nevertheless, the play deserves a place among the noteworthy achievements of native authors. It is frankly and uncompromisingly a tragedy. A happy ending would be unthinkable, but O'Neill has gone a little way toward an opposite extreme and insisted on polishing off his play with certain tragic happenings which are not quite relevant to his theme.

The story concerns two farm boys, Robert and Andrew, closely knit though widely varying in type. Robert longs to be free of the grind of the farm and to find adventure and release in the far-off places. Incidentally, his health has not been good, so his family agrees when he accepts the invitation of a seafaring uncle to take a long voyage around the world on a sailing craft. The very day before his departure he finds that he is beloved by the daughter of the neighboring farmer. He had thought about her romantically, but reservedly, since he believed that she cared for his brother. Her sudden confession that he is the one she loves sweeps him off his feet momentarily, and he decides to stay on the farm. The brother, chagrined to find himself not favored, takes his place on the voyage.

The girl and the boy marry and he makes a fearful mess of farming. And he finds that he has made a mess of life as well, for the girl discovers that, after all, it was the competent Andrew whom she loved all the time. In a bitter scene she upbraids him with his weakness and tells him that when Andrew returns he can take to the road if he chooses and let Andrew run the farm. On his return, however, Andrew soon shows that he is entirely cured of his youthful love, and in a single day he is off again to seize a business opportunity in the Argentine. The luckless couple muddle along on the farm and things go from bad to worse, until in the last act Robert dies of consumption and finds his chance at last to escape from the little valley and go to the far places.

Of course, the fundamental tragedy of the play lies in the fate of the incompetent dreamer forced to battle with the land for a living against every inclination and ability. His disease and death are entirely fortuitous and indeed they lessen the poignancy of his fate, which would have had more force of fear and pity if the author had left him still engaged in his hopeless and thankless task of keeping on and on in the dreary grind. The hero is much too deliberate in dying and the last act is further marred by the addition of a scene which is unnecessary and which compels a wait at a time when the tension is seriously impaired by the fall of the curtain.

O'Neill begins crudely but honestly and frankly with a scene in which two

of his characters sit down and tell the audience the things they need to know, but after this preliminary scene the play gathers pace and power, and until the final act it is a magnificent piece of work, a play in which the happenings are of compelling interest, and more than that, a play in which the point of view of everyone concerned is concisely and clearly set forth in terms of drama. Everybody who saw the best of O'Neill's short plays when they were given by the Washington Square, the Greenwich Village, or the Provincetown Players realized that he had an extraordinary ability to write true and absorbing dialogue. He has done it better than ever in "Beyond the Horizon." His characters talk like real people and yet the process of selection has been so shrewd that there is none of the deadening dullness of the merely literal and photographic.

The power of the play is tremendous, and there is no sense of the author's arbitrarily moving pawns about into implausible situations to thrill an audience. It is as honest and sincere as it is artistic. In the last act we found a distinct letdown in spite of some splendid writing for the theater, because O'Neill has by that time become so carried away with his theme that he has not been able to hold it at arm's length and slash and cut in the light of the fact that audiences are human and fallible and demand a brevity in the relation of all happenings which keep them in the theater after 5 in the afternoon or 11 at night. And more than that, as we have said, it does not seem to us that the progress of the hero's disease is an inevitable part of his tragic career.

The play is to be presented again at a matinee on February 4 and again on February 6. It is to be hoped that a theater will soon be found at which the play may be put on for a regular run, since it is by far the best serious play which any American author has written for years. It is pleasant to record this, for, in a measure, "Beyond the Horizon" offers a justification for all reviewers who went down in the various little alley theaters and shouted loudly about some of the work which was done there. O'Neill's short plays have received such recognition for several years and yet we feel certain that when his long play achieves the success which it deserves, and which it is pretty sure to get, the author will be hailed as a brand new playwright who has just been discovered. His first production on Broadway will be set down as his dramatic birth in spite of such splendid forerunners as "Bound East for Cardiff" and "Where the Cross Is Made."

It is to be hoped that when the play goes on for a regular run most of the present company may be retained, for the performance is one of exceptional skill. Richard Bennett as the hero seems to us to play better than ever before, and there also are performances of an unusually high order by Louise Closser Hale, Helen MacKellar and Erville Anderson, not forgetting good work by Edwin Arnold, Max Mitzel and a child actress called Elfin Finn. In speaking of the fact that O'Neill is still somewhat impractical in the theater, it is worth noting that he provides this child shall be two years old. Of course the little actress is perhaps ten or twelve, but then it seems to us that we remember other actresses in the theater who have played roles even further removed from their actual ages.

## **Beyond the Horizon**

*Alexander Woolcott*

The fare available for the New York theatregoer is immeasurably richer and more substantial because of a new play which was unfolded yesterday afternoon in the Morosco Theatre—an absorbing, significant, and memorable tragedy, so full of meat that it makes most of the remaining fare seem like the merest meringue. It is called “Beyond the Horizon,” and is the work of Eugene O’Neill, son of that same James O’Neill who toured the country for so many years in the heroics of “The Count of Monte Cristo.”

The son’s advent as a dramatist has been marked by several preliminaries in the form of one-act plays, done by the Provincetown folk at their little theatre in Macdougall Street, but “Beyond the Horizon” is the first of his long plays to reach the stage, and even this one comes not for a continuous engagement, but for a series of special matinees. It is presented at the Morosco by John D. Williams with a cast chosen from his own “For the Defense” company, eked out by borrowings from the “Storm” cast at Mr. Broadhurst’s theatre. This amalgam, while rather conspicuously imperfect in one role, is for the most part admirably suited to the work in hand, player after player rising gratefully and spontaneously to the opportunities afforded by a playwright of real power and imagination.

The only reason for not calling “Beyond the Horizon” a great play is the natural gingerliness with which a reviewer uses that word—particularly in the flush of the first hour after the fall of the final curtain. Certainly, despite a certain clumsiness and confusion involved in its too luxurious multiplicity of scenes, the play has greatness in it and marks O’Neill as one of our foremost playwrights, as one of the most spacious men to be both gifted and tempted to write for the theatre in America. It is a play of larger aspect and greater force than was “John Ferguson,” a play as vital and as undiluted a product of our own soil as any that has come this way since the unforgettable premiere of “The Great Divide.” In its strength, its fidelity, its color, its irony, and its pitilessness, it recalls nothing quite so much as one of the Wessex tales of Thomas Hardy. As to whether it will be, or could be, popular—well, that lies not within the province of this reviewer (nor the wisdom of anybody) to say.

“Beyond the Horizon” rehearses the tragedy of a man whose body and mind need the open road and the far spaces, but who, by force of wanton circumstance and the bondage of a romance that soon burns itself out, is imprisoned within the hill-walled boundaries of a few unyielding acres, chained to a task for which he is not fitted, withheld from a task for which he was born. He fails, and his failure distills a poison for all about him. He sinks,

<sup>1</sup>“Eugene O’Neill’s Tragedy,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1920

<sup>2</sup>“The Great Divide” (William Vaughan Moody, 1906) is regarded as a turning point in our early twentieth-century drama because it treated the contrasting attitudes of the American East and West toward social morality with an honesty and sincerity that started the transformation of American drama from light entertainment to serious literature.—Ed



amid wretched and disheartening poverty, into consumption, and the life in him wanes before your eyes, through scene after scene written with splendid art and a cunning knowledge of that plague, with its alternating psychology of hope and depression. At the end, he crawls out of the farmhouse to die in the open road, his last glance straining at the horizon beyond which he had never ventured, his last words pronouncing a message of warning from one who had not lived in harmony with what he was.

The accompanying and minor tragedy is that of the brother, a sturdy, generous, earth-bound fellow, born to till those very acres, and sure to go wrong if he ever left the clean earth and the work amid things of his own creation. So in the Hardy-esque irony of the O'Neill mood, it is this brother whom Fate and his own character drive out into the lonely open. The measured tread of Fate can be heard among the overtones of this remarkable tragedy.

O'Neill is not only inexorable in the working out of his play to its saddening conclusion, but a bit intractable in the matter of its structure, a bit unyielding both to the habits of the average audience and the physical limitations of the average playhouse. The breaking of his final act into two scenes, mark of a chronic looseness of construction, is distinctly dissipative in its effect and his scenario calls for two pretentious exteriors which the very palpable draperies (painted in the curiously inappropriate style of a German post card) do not provide very persuasively.

If the play itself has a certain awkwardness and if its mere mounting is sometimes clumsy, the cast, at least, is uncommonly fine. As the home-bound wanderer, Richard Bennett plays with fine eloquence, imagination, and finesse—a performance people will remember as they remember his John Shand in "What Every Woman Knows." Save for an occasional Farnum-esque posture,<sup>2</sup> trailed from the "Storm," Edward Arnold plays the brother with tremendous force and conviction. Then Helen McKellar proves herself a first-rate actress as the woman, while Louise Closser Hale darts (like a trout for a fly) at the best part that has come her way since Prossy bridled in "Candida." Then Erville Anderson, as the old father—well, there are riches in this performance as there are in this play which make the reviewer "yearn for the open spaces" of the Sunday newspaper.

### ***The Emperor Jones***

*Alexander Woolcott*

The Provincetown Players began their new season in Macdougall Street last week with the impetus of a new play by the as yet unbridled Eugene O'Neill, an extraordinarily striking and dramatic study of panic fear which is called "The Emperor Jones."<sup>1</sup> It reinforces the impression that for strength and originality he has no rival among the American writers for the stage.

<sup>2</sup>Farnum-esque. Reference to Dustin Farnum, popular actor of Western characters in the early part of this century. Arnold was apparently imitating his poses.—Ed.

<sup>1</sup>"The New O'Neill Play," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1920.

Though this new play of his is so clumsily produced that its presentation consists largely of long, unventilated intermissions interspersed with fragmentary scenes, it weaves a most potent spell, thanks partly to the force and cunning of the author, thanks partly to the admirable playing of Charles S. Gilpin in a title rôle so predominant that the play is little more than a dramatic monologue. His is an uncommonly powerful and imaginative performance, in several respects unsurpassed this season in New York. Mr. Gilpin is a negro.

The Emperor Jones is a burly ducky from the States who has broken jail there and escaped as a stowaway to what the program describes as "a West Indian island not yet self-determined by white marines." There, thanks a good deal to the American business philosophy he had picked up as a half-preoccupied porter listening wide-eyed in the smoking rooms of the Pullman cars back home, he is sufficiently bold, ingenious and unscrupulous to make himself ruler within two years. He has moved unharmed among his sullen subjects by virtue of a legend of his invention that only a silver bullet could harm him—this part of the play, at least, is *not* Mr. O'Neill's invention—but now, when he has squeezed from his domain just about all the wealth it will yield, he suspects it would be well for him to take flight. As the play begins, the measured sound of a beating tom-tom in the hills gives warning that the natives are in conclave there, using all manner of incantations to work up their courage to the point of rebellion.

The hour of Emperor Jones has come, and nightfall finds him already at the edge of the distant forest, through whose trackless waste he knows a way to safety and freedom. He has food hidden there and, anyway, his revolver carries five bullets for his enemies and one of silver for himself in case he is ever really cornered.

It is a bold, self-reliant adventurer who strikes out into the jungle at sunset. It is a confused, broken, naked, half-crazed creature who, at dawn, stumbles blindly back to his starting place, only to find the natives calmly waiting there to shoot him down with bullets they have been piously molding according to his own prescription.

The forest has broken him. Full of strange sounds and shadows, it conjures up visions of his own and his ancestral past. These haunt him, and at each crisis of fear he fires wildly into the darkness and goes crashing on through the underbrush, losing his way, wasting all his defense, signaling his path, and waking a thousand sinister echoes to work still more upon his terrible fear.

It begins with the rattle of invisible dice in the darkness, and then, as in a little clearing, he suddenly sees the squatting ducky he had slain back home in a gamblers' quarrel. He plunges on, but only to find himself once more strangely caught in the old chain gang, while the guard cracks that same whip whose stinging lash had goaded him to another murder. Then, as his fear quickens, the forest fills with old-fashioned people who stare at him and bid for him. They seem to be standing him on some sort of block. They examine his teeth, test his strength, flex his biceps. The scene yields only to the galley

of a slave ship, and his own cries of terror take up the rhythmic lamentation of his people. Finally, it is a race memory of old Congo fears which drives him shrieking back through the forest to the very clearing whence he had started and where now his death so complacently awaits him.

From first to last, through all the agonizing circle of his flight, he is followed by the dull beat, beat, beat, of the tom-tom, ever nearer, ever faster, till it seems to be playing an ominous accompaniment to his mounting panic. The heightening effect of this device is much as you might imagine.

The Provincetown Players have squanderously invested in cushions for their celebrated seats and a concrete dome to catch and dissolve their lights, so that even on their little stage they can now get such illusions of distance and the wide outdoors as few of their uptown rivals can achieve. But of immeasurably greater importance in their present enterprise, they have acquired an actor, one who has it in him to invoke the pity and the terror and the indescribable foreboding which are part of the secret of "The Emperor Jones."

### ***The Emperor Jones***

*Mauda Castellon*

The Provincetown Players have done it again. Down at 133 Macdougall street in their dingy hall, with its stiff benches and its dim lights and its thick atmosphere, they are producing another chef 'd'oeuvre, Eugene O'Neill's "The Emperor Jones." They are giving hundreds the most thrilling evening of their theatrical lives. They are turning away dozens. People squat on their coats on the hard and not immaculate floors, or sit cheerfully on radiators, or stand patiently for two hours while the tragedy of fear of a Negro porter and ex-convict, turned primitive man again, unfolds itself before the fascinated imagination.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! goes the drum of the Provincetown Players behind the scenes for a steady hour and a half, through eight scenes and seven intermissions, until the brain throbs to its monotonous beat and the world of reality is forgotten. You see only Brutus Jones, who came as an escaped convict to "a West Indian island not yet self-determined by white marines," as the author grimly describes it, and turned it into an empire by the power of arrogance and braggadocio.

Jones had learned the difference between mere stealing and high finance as a Pullman porter in the States, by listening to the rich white folks tell how to get money and power without getting into jail. It was easy to practice his arts on the poor black trash, and he ruled and flourished and stowed away large sums for the day of wrath when he should be overturned.

So when he hears the monotonous sound of the tom-tom rousing his people into an orgy of frenzy against him, he starts off philosophically on the lonely march that is to take him to Martinique and the world beyond where wealth

and freedom await him. And then things begin to happen. You see the disintegration of the Emperor Jones. Through the dark night, in the lonely forest, the fears and the terrors of his ancestors sweep over him. The ghosts of those he has killed and other "hants" mock him. He throws away the trappings of the Emperor to walk more easily, but he has thrown away the armor of civilization as well. He becomes an abject creature, reverting to his ancestral life. In his dreams he lives through his convict days, through the slavery of his fathers, and goes back to the life of his race on the Congo with Witch Doctor and Crocodile God exercising their spell. He shoots away his precious bullets at the figments of his fears until, blindly returning to his starting place, he is shot by the native chief at dawn, a victim of something deeper and stronger than his acquired cleverness.

Absolutely nothing happens in the play except this. Yet by his vivid imagination and relentless power the author casts his spell over even the most pedestrian listener. Jones' hallucinations and reversions to the primitive savage are depicted with the simplicity and directness of a master. One thinks of Poe and Conrad and H. De Vere Stacpoole's story of Africa for anything to match this achievement.

The acting of the name part by Charles S. Gilpin is an extraordinary achievement. The rich and varied tones of a voice that changes from boastful arrogance to whining, contrition, the variety and power of his performance are amazing. The stage settings, too, are effective, and the beating of the tom-tom is hypnotic in its effect. Altogether this is a rare and richly imaginative feast for lovers of true drama. No one should miss it.

### ***The Emperor Jones***

*John Shand*

Eugene O'Neill, the American dramatist, comes to Europe with a great reputation. Genius, we hear, is not too high a term for him. So that on going to see a new play of his some of us expect to see something "Diff'rent" from the usual. *The Emperor Jones*, produced last week at the Ambassadors, at first seems unconventional in form, and though few would argue that constructional novelty is any criterion of future fame, praise must always be given to any fresh attempt to loosen the girths of modern drama. In my opinion, the modern technique is too tight. The acquisition by any less vigorous mind than an Ibsen's of the highly specialised technicalities necessary for the construction of a modern play, is apt to produce a clever juggler rather than an artist. But, remembering always the exception, it is also a general rule that the genius in any art does not invent new forms, but uses to their full extent the forms moulded by others. The fact, then (I quote Mr. C. E. Bechhofer's preface to *Emperor Jones*) that "for years dramatists have been attempting to find a new kind of play, something that would pass the limits of contemporary drama," and that "in *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill may be said

to have solved this problem," is no evidence of genius in the author, even if it be true. But, to put aside the feeling that G. Bernard Shaw, not to mention the Expressionists, may also be said to have solved this problem, it may be well to examine whether O'Neill is quite so original as some would have us believe.

Readers may remember that a few years ago the Everyman Theatre gave us some of this author's one-act plays, and a full play, *Diff'rent*. Afterwards, at a West End theatre, *Anna Christie* was produced. I should like to point out that O'Neill has written about a dozen one-act plays. Now this is very significant if we take in conjunction the fact (which is obvious to all who have seen or read *Diff'rent*) that this play is really two one-act plays divided by an interval of thirty years, and that in *Anna Christie*, which is in four acts, there is a decided declension of interest after the first act. After saying this, and after seeing *The Emperor Jones*, I am prepared to suggest that O'Neill is strictly a one-act playwright, and probably has not enough creative impetus to carry him the length of a full play. Of course, there is nothing derogatory to O'Neill in saying this. We cannot all be major artists. We cannot all be Shakespeares and Ibsens. The perfect painter of miniatures is no less to be admired than he who fills a mighty canvas with his genius. The miniaturist we do not admire is only he who, despising the real talent he possesses, endeavours to use a larger brush. In all the arts the same rules apply, and the same results obtain when they are forgotten. The perfect short story writer is rarely the great novelist as well. Just so, the one-act playwright may attain perfection in his own medium even while he fails in each attempt to write a full-length play. And he fails, as all like him must fail, because he is fluttering at the bars of his own talent, attempting to win a freedom that he will never be able to use. How many artists have been spoilt because they have tried, or have been persuaded that they ought to try, to do "important" work? It will be a pity if O'Neill is spoilt in this way, for he has an undoubted talent for the short piece; and if he does not, perhaps cannot, make his characters very significant; he is certainly a master of emotional effect, even if the emotions he plays upon are the very crudest.

With the suggestion in mind that this author's proper medium is the one-act play, let us examine *The Emperor Jones*. The action takes place on an island in the West Indies. Brutus Jones, an unusually intelligent and self-reliant negro of tall and powerful build, has made himself "Emperor" over the "trash" niggers. For years he had been in the States. Owing to a quarrel in which he killed his negro opponent, Jones had been given a twenty years' sentence; but he had escaped, after killing his warder, and had fled to this island. His personality and intelligence have enabled him to dominate the other negroes. As "Emperor," he has ground them down with taxes and appropriated the money. But he realises that they will sometime rise against him, and he has made all arrangements for a hurried departure.

The scene opens in a spacious audience chamber, bare of all furniture except a bright scarlet wooden throne. Through archways can be seen an unclouded sky of intense blue. This setting is very simple and very good. After

an unnecessary scene between a negress and a white-livered, shiftless, urchless Cockney trader who acts as chorus to the play, Emperor Jones appears. There follows a well-written scene of great interest. As the huge negro talks to the comic and sickly representative of Europe, we hear the necessary antecedent facts at the same time as we learn to appreciate the vigour of the negro. He boasts and swaggers, but O'Neill makes us believe that he has something to boast about. The trader tells Jones that his game is up, that the rebellion has started. Jones, incredulous, clangs the attendance bell. No one comes. After a moment of anger he accepts the situation, and decides "to resign de job of Emperor right dis minute." It is late afternoon, and a tropical sun burns hotly. He will have to reach the edge of the great forest by running over the plain, before evening. After resting, and eating the food he has buried there in readiness, he is going to run all night through the forest to the coast. And as he boasts to the Cockney of his cunning foresight, there comes from the distant hills the low vibrant throb of the tom-tom. It is the "trash" niggers weaving spells to aid them in their attack. It brings a moment's breath of fear to the superstitious negro in Jones. But he waves the fear away, and starts his flight from the palace, grandiloquently through "the front door."

The rest of the play consists of seven very short scenes, in which we see Jones in various parts of the forest. Physically exhausted by hunger, mentally harassed by fear of the ghostly visions which appear every time he rests, he loses his way. Each vision disappears when he shoots, but every time he shoots he remembers that he has only six bullets and that he is also indicating his position. Throughout these scenes sounds the gradually accelerating thump of the tom-tom, which also quickens at each ghostly appearance, giving us out loud, as it were, the negro's heart-beats quickened by fear. The last scene is at the edge of the forest. Some natives are there, one frantically beating the tom-tom, the others armed with rifles. The Cockney is also there. "Ain't yer goin' in an' 'unt 'im in the woods?" he asks. "We cotch him," answers the chief. There is a sound of snapping twigs. The natives shoot. The dead body of Brutus Jones is dragged in. By losing his way he had run in a circle, and he comes out of the forest where he went in.

All this reads much better than it acts. Indeed, the scenes in the wood are scarcely dramatic, and being almost repetitions of each other certainly do not create a crescendo of interest. Besides, ghosts and supernatural visions are hardly ever successful in the theatre. Shakespeare is the only dramatist who has dared to bring on a ghost three times in one play. He managed, it is true, to make the third visitation more effective than the first, but there are few dramatists who could do likewise. The first act of *The Emperor Jones* is good, and could almost stand by itself. The rest of the play is a monologue in a series of anticlimaxes. The author has found a good theme, but the play will never be a famous one because there are so many plays with good ideas spoilt by wrong treatment. It is worth seeing, if only for the first act, but mainly you ought to see it because of Mr Paul Robeson in the leading part. I have nothing but admiration for his performance. Where the author was

good he was magnificent. He failed, I think, only in those pitfalls of the author's which only a personality of the greatest magnetism could have o'erleaped. Mr. Robeson's voice, intelligence, physique, and sense of the stage immediately made me want to see him in *Othello*.

Of those readers who see this play many, I hope, will agree that the theory that O'Neill is a one-act dramatist holds good in *Emperor Jones* as in *Diff'rent*. And that in any case a series of monologues on a theme of fear hardly passes beyond the limits of contemporary drama. What are most plays written round a "star" actor but monologues on that well-known theme, the capabilities of that particular "star"? But it is unfortunate for the theory that O'Neill is a good one-act dramatist that the curtain-raiser should have been *The Long Voyage Home*. For in this piece is exposed to view the simple and conventional mind of the author, who at first sight surprises us by the unusualness of his characters, and his literal transcription of their language, but who is soon found to be developing them so conventionally that we know exactly what they will do and say next. So that although he "piles on the agony," letting us know that the quiet, simple sailor about to be drugged, robbed, and put on to an outgoing ship, has all the virtues, that he has been saving up for two years to buy a farm, and that his aged mother is waiting for him, we are not very interested in him, and watch him being drugged, robbed and carried off without emotion. As in other plays and books of this kind, to use Wilde's perfect phrase, it is the suspense of the author which becomes unbearable. /629/

### ***Anna Christie***

*Alan Dale*

Eugene O'Neill's latest play, "Anna Christie," the third of Arthur Hopkin's productions for the current season, opened last night at the Vanderbilt Theatre with Pauline Lord in the title role and George Marion, Frank Shannon and Eugenie Blair in leading roles in the supporting cast.

Life on the New York water front of a decade ago and on a coal barge between the metropolis and Boston at the same date forms the subject matter of the new piece, and its four acts deal with the moral adjustments among an old Swedish sea captain, Chris Christopherson, and his daughter, Anna Christie, and a young Irish sailor, Matt Burke.

The first act takes place in the front and back bars of Johnny the Priest, in West street. Old Chris puts into port only to find that his daughter, Anna, has come to visit him from Minneapolis, where he has had her kept by relatives to guard her from the sea and its people. He hasn't reckoned with the pitfalls of the land, though, and the fact that Anna has gone on the pimpernel path is apparent to everyone but himself.

The girl finally yields to persuasions to ship aboard the barge for a rest, and the second act discloses the rear deck of the scow at anchor in a fog in

the outer harbor of Provincetown To it comes a boat load of sailors rescued from a wreck and among them is a young Irishman, Matt Burke. Between him and Anna an attraction springs up at once, and unaware of her past he begs her to marry him Such an outcome, however, is not to the liking of old Chris, who sees in it evidence of the curse of the sea, which seems about to outwit him after all

Boston Harbor aboard the barge is the scene of the third act Matt is insistent Old Chris is threatening The storm breaks when Anna discloses the secrets of her past But Matt will have none of her now, although her father is willing, with this turn of affairs, for him to take her

Two days of anxious watching pass for Anna on the barge She has bought a ticket back to New York, but can't bring herself to use it Finally her father comes back to the barge, the worse for drink. And Matt returns, too, unable to forget his love for the girl in spite of her past After a fearful struggle with his conscience and a testing of Anna's change of heart since she met him the two are brought together

The setting of the scene in the fog in the second act, by Robert Edmond Jones, is the most noteworthy contribution of the play in a scenic way

### ***Anna Christie***

*Kenneth Macgowan*

The playwright, the producer, and player met last night in one of those moments of accomplishment which make dramatic history Under the spell of "Anna Christie," of Pauline Lord's acting, and of Arthur Hopkins's direction, it is hard to think of any American play that is the superior of Eugene O'Neill's newest work in truth of life or in dramatic force.

O'Neill has never so fully achieved his dramatic purpose 'None of his plays so completely realizes its characters and their significance' None of his plays is so full-bodied None of his plays plough through the tragedy and suffering of life to such an affirmation of its eternal vitality

' "Anna Christie" is a play about the sort of people O'Neill knew when, like the rest of them, he hung out at the waterfront barroom in which the first act passes. They might have been types a father who has neglected his daughter, a daughter who has gone wrong, and a strong-hearted lover.

Instead, they are people a drunken, kind, jealous old Swede barge captain, who must part with a sodden harridan when his daughter turns up from the west to live with him, a daughter who comes out of a hospital, a jail and a brothel, hating men, hiding her past, and finding a strange, blind cleanness in the quiet of the sea, a bragging Irish stoker, with the power of love and hate surging in him. '

They are all seen with a truth that carries both the humor and pity of life. They are simple people, anger and emotion surge directly out of them, unpent



by any veneer of constraint. And when the demands of the men call out her past in protest, they clash in a scene of terrific spiritual conflict.

In the end life goes on as it has gone from the beginning. It is not the hopeless, inescapable tragedy of living on and on. You may call it the happy ending if you like. It is the acceptance of suffering and happiness lived out into new life.

Small roles, like James C. Mack's barkeep and Eugenie Blair's drunken woman, are acted neatly within their limits. The three crucial roles are played as three roles are seldom played on our stage, and as they must be played if the truth of "Anna Christie" is to live. George Marion's barge captain is merely perfect. In conception and in detail here is old Chris complete. Through Frank Shannon, a player who has counted for little heretofore, Hopkins has found a man to capture the strength and pungency and vigorous braggardly romance without which the part of the lover and the play itself are impossible.

As for Pauline Lord as the girl, here is naturalism—or whatever you want to call minute, exact and subtle reproduction of emotion—absolutely at its best. I can think of no performance except Mrs. Fiske's in "Salvation Nell" that approaches Miss Lord's in truthfulness and in skill, and Miss Lord's is the better. "Skill" is too slight a word. This is the spirit lived spontaneously and inevitably before our very eyes. Everything that Miss Lord promised in "The Deluge" four years ago she accomplishes here. The strange inner bloom of life is on the lips of this woman of the streets, and the broken suffering of life is in her voice. No wonder the audience cheered.

### ***Anna Christie and The Straw***

*Robert Allerton Parker*

Technical excellence may be, and indeed often is, achieved by American playwrights who can never hope to be considered dramatists. Their plays may make millions of dollars, yet their true cleverness usually consists only in their ability to conceal, until the final curtain, the fact that they have nothing to tell us that is worth listening to. Their products are like the confections of pastry cooks, often pleasant on the palate, but no more to be considered drama than "French" pastry can be considered sculpture. Some of them rewrite the same play over and over, but *plus ça change*, the more it is the same thing. The quality that differentiates the dramatist from the playwright is not that of technical ability. The dramatist is confronted with the complex and difficult task of re-creating, of creating anew, the very structure of drama, in this effort to impress upon us his vision of reality, his new scale of values. In Eugene O'Neill we find such a dramatist—a dramatist with imperfections and defects, perhaps, but a dramatist struggling to express his vision in a medium that presents at every moment difficulties and complexities. Our deepest interest in these plays is aroused not so much by their

theatrical vigor as by the opportunity they afford of watching a dramatist at work—a man in the process of growth and development.

Eugene O'Neill's vision of the world is not an ordinary one. It is this that lifts him above most of our dramatists, whose intuitions concerning the universe, as indicated in their works, are usually those of a prosperous restaurateur. O'Neill sometimes has so much to convey that his vehicle of expression creaks and groans under the load. Each of his plays has the supreme merit of arousing our interest in his next one, since we always anticipate a greater mastery of his medium, a fresher recreation of structure, a more dynamic unity of matter and form.<sup>1</sup> In "*Anna Christie*," for instance, he seems to have come into closer contact with his problem, to have attained a greater intensity of vision. Yet we are apt to be sidetracked by the purely picturesque, the tang and color of his dialogue, his power to saturate us in the heavy atmosphere of that waterfront saloon and grimy coalbarge in which the action is placed. Old Chris, Anna his daughter, Mat Burke, might seem to be mere portraits painted from the life. But, considered more deeply, these figures of the sea and of the underworld, dirty, drunken, and generally disreputable as they are, are placed before us because in them Eugene O'Neill finds embodied the fundamental realities of his world. Unflinchingly men and women must face the bitter realities of this mysterious universe in which we seem to find ourselves more or less aliens. Useless, he seems to imply, is the effort to patch together makeshift shelters in any futile attempt to shut out the ruthless universe, useless, even cowardly, not to measure one's strength against these stern eternal realities. Morally and physically men befool themselves in their eternal whining for another world, in creating for themselves the illusion of happiness to be found "somewhere else."

For Eugene O'Neill the sea is usually the constant symbol of these eternal realities, the inhuman powers of nature against which men and women must measure their puny strength. Yet in facing unafraid this reality, this very act brings out into full expression all of their latent qualities of courage, honesty, and strength. The ending, happy or unhappy, has really nothing to do with the case, provided in the conflict people shed their pettiness, dishonesty, and fatuity. In this play *Anna Christie* has been sent away inland to a farm, to be saved from the devastating influence of what her father, Old Chris, calls "that old devil Sea." She returns to him, soiled, crushed, escaping from the unspeakable pit of prostitution into which she had fallen, far from the sea. It is the loneliness, the detached majesty of the sea, that awakens in the girl the courage to fling into the unwilling ears of her father and her love the story of her degradation. The scene of this stinging revelation was built up with increasing centripetal power. We seemed to be swept into the maelstrom of its significance. Audience, actors, and author seemed here to become one. This scene marks the most exalted moment yet attained by Eugene O'Neill. After this superb triumph, only a carping critic would emphasize the demerits of any particular act or insist upon the supremacy of the first act. If there is any particular weakness in the play, it is to be found in the author's dependence upon "exposition." The great danger of expository first acts is not that

the audience may learn too little, but that it may be told too much. It seems to me that in "Anna Christie" the impact of Anna's relentless confession in the third act would have been tenfold more overwhelming if she had refrained, in that first act, from telling the detailed story of her downfall and degradation at first meeting with an apparently chance passerby. To have suggested this past would have sharpened our interest, to expose it completely seems to me to have loosened rather than to have tightened the screws of Mr. O'Neill's dramatic mechanism.

In Pauline Lord, the difficult rôle of Anna found the ideal interpreter. It was a part that required all that the actress possessed of flexibility and reserve power. Miss Lord's was the problem of making this ignorant, laconic, almost inarticulate girl the mouthpiece of O'Neill's burning ironies. She must flame into exigent and exalted expression. Her very eloquence was heightened, in Miss Lord's interpretations, by the limitations and colloquial brevity of her vocabulary, by the suggested fatigue of her emotional expression. Never did this actress give any sign of strain or exhaustion of resource. Her achievement can only be indicated by the statement that Miss Lord reminded us of those great continental actresses whom we have never seen, but whose art has inspired legends of great acting among critics.

Of "The Straw," produced by Mr. Tyler at the Greenwich Village Theatre, much less can be said. In this the theme is tuberculosis, and its central victim an eighteen-year-old girl, Eileen Carmody, on the very threshold of life. Until the illuminating flash that lights up its last act, the play is for the most of its length an ironic picture of the regulation, the standardization, almost the capitalization of the white plague. Mr. O'Neill exposes the life of its heterogeneous victims in a sanatorium in Connecticut. The basic conviction which flashes finally into a challenge seems to be in what modern science terms the psychogenetic origin of disease. Dying Eileen Carmody is brought to the belated realization that she may vanquish death because so she must live to save the life of her lover. This decision to live may have come too late in her losing battle against death and disease, but it seems to be Mr. O'Neill's great and thrilling point that it does come, and that with this decision his heroine lives, lives intensely, triumphantly, if only for a few days or a few moments.

The smouldering fires of romance blaze up in the last final moments of this play. Mr. O'Neill is all on the side of romance, even as a vital lie, and is opposed to a coldly statistical science and a therapy that passively accepts and charts the inevitable. Our regret is that the road to this great moment is so beset with *longueurs* and repetitions. Perhaps it was the somewhat uninspired production and acting that failed to bring out the values the author had implanted. The performance of "The Straw" was in a sense almost conventionalized and sentimentalized into the familiar Broadway production. It was played in the mood of light comedy, and the more acid lines of Eugene O'Neill's incisive pen almost eradicated. Miss Margolo Gilmore as the stricken Eileen is a pretty and charming actress, who is not yet old enough to suggest and depict disillusioned and dying youth. Otto Kruger, as Murray, on the other hand, fully met the requirements of the part.

But one surmised that the dramatist himself had not felt as intensely as in "Anna Christie" the full possibilities of his theme, that his interest in its possibilities had occasionally wandered. The play was nevertheless full of suggestion. Its very imperfections, as in all of the plays of this developing dramatist, arouse keen anticipation of new and greater achievement. /236/

***The Hairy Ape***

*Alexander Woolcott*

The little theatre of the Provincetownsmen in Macdougall Street was packed to the doors with astonishment last evening as scene after scene unfolded in the new play by Eugene O'Neill. This was "The Hairy Ape," a bitter, brutal, wildly fantastic play of nightmare hue and nightmare distortion. It is a monstrously uneven piece, now flamingly eloquent, now choked and thwarted and inarticulate. Like most of his writing for the theatre, it is the worse here and there for the lack of a fierce, unintimidated blue pencil. But it has a little greatness in it, and it seems rather absurd to fret overmuch about the undisciplined imagination of a young playwright towering so conspicuously above the milling, mumbling crowd of playwrights who have no imagination at all.

"The Hairy Ape" has been superbly produced. There is a rumor abroad that Arthur Hopkins, with a proprietary interest in the piece, has been lurking around its rehearsals and the program confesses that Robert Edmond Jones went down to Macdougall Street and took a hand with Cleon Throckmorton in designing the eight pictures which the play calls for. That preposterous little theatre has one of the most cramped stages New York has ever known, and yet on it the artists have created the illusion of vast spaces and endless perspectives. They drive one to the conclusion that when a stage seems pinched and little, it is the mind of the producer that is pinched and little. This time O'Neill, unbridled, set them a merry pace in the eccentric gait of his imaginings. They kept up with him.

O'Neill begins his fable by posing before you the greatest visible contrast in social and physical circumstances. He leads you up the gangplank of a luxurious liner bound for Europe. He plunges you first into the stokers' pit, thrusting you down among the men as they stumble in from the furnaces, hot, sweaty, choked with coal dust, brutish. Squirm as you may, he holds you while you listen to the rumble of their discontent, and while you listen, also, to speech more squalid than even an American audience heard before in an American theatre. It is true talk, all of it, and only those who have been so softly bred that they have never really heard the vulgate spoken in all its richness would venture to suggest that he has exaggerated it by so much as a syllable in order to agitate the refined. On the contrary.

Then, in a twinkling, he drags you (as the ghosts dragged Scrooge) up out of all this murk and thudding of engines and brawling of speech, to a cool, sweet,

sunlit stretch of the hurricane deck, where, at lazy ease, lies the daughter of the President of the line's board of directors, a nonchalant dilettante who has found settlement work frightfully interesting and is simply crazy to go down among the stokers and see how the other half lives aboard ship.

Then follows the confrontation—the fool fop of a girl and the huge animal of a stoker who had taken a sort of dizzy romantic pride in himself and his work as something that was real in an unreal world, as something that actually counted, as something that was and had force. Her horrified recoil from him as from some loathsome, hairy ape is the first notice served on him by the world that he doesn't belong. The remaining five scenes are the successive blows by which this is driven in on him, each scene, as written, as acted and as intensified by the artists, taking on more and more of the nightmare quality with which O'Neill seemed possessed to endow his fable.

The scene on Fifth Avenue when the hairy ape comes face to face with a little parade of wooden-faced churchgoers who walk like automata and prattle of giving a "Hundred Per Cent American Bazaar" as a contribution to the solution of discontent among the lower classes—the scene on Blackwell's Island with the endless rows of cells and the argot of the prisoners floating out of darkness, the care with which each scene ends in a retributive and terrifying closing in upon the bewildered fellow—all these preparations induce you at last to accept as natural and inevitable and right that the hairy ape should, by the final curtain, be found dead inside the cage of the gorilla in the Bronx Zoo.

Except for the role of the girl, which is pretty badly played by Mary Blair, the cast captured for "The Hairy Ape" is an exceptionally good one. Louis Wolheim, though now and then rather painfully off the beat in his co-operation with the others, gives a capital impersonation of the stoker, and lesser parts are well managed by Harry O'Neill as an Irish fireman dreaming of the old days of sailing vessels, and Harold West as a cockney agitator who is fearfully annoyed because of the hairy ape's concentrating his anger against this one little plutocrat instead of maintaining an abstract animosity against plutocrats in general.

In Macdougall Street now and doubtless headed for Broadway, we have a turbulent and tremendous play, so full of blemishes that the merest fledgling among the critics could point out a dozen, yet so vital and interesting and teeming with life that those playgoers who let it escape them will be missing one of the real events of the year.

### ***The Hairy Ape***

*Walter Prichard Eaton*

The director of the Odéon in Paris has asked the Drama League of America to select an American play for production at his theatre. The selection has

not yet been made, but the League could not do better than to recommend Eugene O'Neill's latest drama, "The Hairy Ape," which is now being exhibited by the Provincetown Players in their dingy little playhouse on Macdougall Street. "The Hairy Ape" is without question not only the most interesting American play of this season, but the most striking play of many seasons. It belongs, furthermore, to the future rather than the past, it is forward-facing, suggestive, untraditional. One's only fear is that it might prove too strong meat for Paris, where the drama still lingers in the bonds of traditionalism.

"The Hairy Ape" is written in eight short, abrupt scenes, and might almost be called an expressionistic tragi-comedy of modern industrial unrest. The hero, if so conventional a word can be applied to the leading figure of this play, is a mighty stoker called "Yank," and we see him first, stripped to the waist, with the rest of his half-naked shift, in their fo'c'sle bunk-room. He can outcurse, outfight, outfeel them all, and he is proud of his powers, proud of his job as stoker at the heart of the ship, glories to think that he is steel and coal and motion. "Twenty-five knots an hour!—that's me!" We next see the ultra-sophisticated daughter of the owner of the liner, lolling on the deck and pining for the sensation of going down into the stokehole to see how the other half lives. Another change, the curtains part, and out of the darkness gleam the rims of the boiler-doors. A bell clangs, the doors swing open, a terrific red glare leaps out at the audience, and Yank and his mates heave in the coal. The bell clangs again, too soon, and Yank is cursing the engineer with terrific violence, when he turns to see the girl beside him. She almost faints at the sight of him, cries out that he is a beast, and is dragged away, as he hurls his shovel after her with a horrid oath. Another change, we are back in the fo'c'sle to see Yank completely upset by the incident, brooding over the depths of social difference revealed to him, burning with hatred, rage, revenge. He is no longer steel, coal, speed, because he no longer is sure of himself. To make sure of himself, he is going forth on a mission of revenge.

We see him next on Fifth Avenue. The passers-by are strange, unreal automata, wearing masks all alike. He makes no more impression on them than if they were dreams, all that happens is that a policeman beats him up and arrests him. Then we see him in a cell on the Island. Out of the darkness come the snarls and oaths and horrid howls of other prisoners. One prisoner reads from the *New York Times* an attack on the I. W. W., as a menace to civilization. The Hairy Ape resolves to join the Wobblies. When we next observe him, he is trying to join, that he, too, may plant dynamite beneath the steel-magnate's home. But the Wobblies throw him out as an *agent-provocateur*. Finally, in his puzzled despair, he reaches the gorilla's cage in the Zoo. Ah! a brother, the real hairy ape! He lets the gorilla loose, to go with him on a pilgrimage of destruction. But the gorilla silently seizes him in a deadly embrace and tosses him into the cage, where he dies behind the bars.

Such, in brief, is the story; and there is really no more to it than that—eight flashes of scene which burn on the brain of the beholder the picture of a naked soul in torment, using realistic symbols or fantastic ones, according

as each may best serve the purpose. This, certainly, is not drama as we have known it; it is neither drama of realism nor of poetic suggestion. It is something new, something strange (though previsionsed in "Liliom") and something so profoundly theatrical that it can not be expressed or even intimated in a printed text. The text, to be sure, could give a suggestion of Mr. O'Neill's strange power over language, his ability to make a stream of foul oaths and stoker's slang and imprecations roll in a kind of wild organ-music, but it would only confuse one, perhaps, regarding the "meaning" of the play, simply because it would send one looking for a meaning, as printed words always do, when, in that intellectual sense, the play has no meaning at all. The puzzled critics who have decided that Mr. O'Neill is preaching class-consciousness and red revolution, and the equally puzzled critics who have decided that he is illustrating how brute force defeats itself, are alike beside the mark; or, perhaps, they are both quite right—what of it? Here is a soul profoundly shaken in respect of its fundamental faith in itself, and swirled into contest with forces beyond its ken. How can that abstract struggle be given a concrete, visual, theatrical shape? To this question "The Hairy Ape" as it appears on the stage, is the answer.

Greatly aided by the stage-designs and lighting by Messrs. Cleon Throckmorton and Robert Edmond Jones (indeed, impotent without them), Mr. O'Neill has been able to use the harshest realism as a springboard into startling imaginative effects. When the Hairy Ape's soul has been stung with doubt and hatred, the loud laughter of his mates suddenly becomes rhythmic, like the fearful tattoo of a drum. When the boiler-doors are open, six red, searing searchlight-glances strike into the eyeballs of the audience like flashes from the Inferno. Amid the masked manikins on Fifth Avenue, the Hairy Ape moves as in a dream, in worlds unrealized. Most marvellous is the scene in jail. Only Yank's cell-door shows in a beam of pallid light, the rest is darkness. But out of the dark comes the husky voice of the prisoner quoting from the *New York Times*, and then rises a score of other voices, howling, jeering, cursing, groaning—the terrific strophe of the caged. The last scene shows the gigantic form of the gorilla behind his bars, dimly silhouetted against /160/ a window just flushed with dawn. He rises up; one lurching stride and he is out, one crushing embrace, a strangled cry, and Yank is done for; which would be sheer horror and nothing more, if Yank were a realistic character, but which actually is the last theatric symbol which carries to the mind, through ear and eye, the tragedy not of a person, but of a state of soul.

There will be those, no doubt, who will be revolted at Mr. O'Neill's choice of subject for his expressionistic treatment. That he takes a soul from out the lowest bowels of a plunging liner, out of grime and heat and sweat and ignorance, out of an atmosphere of foul oaths and obscenity, will offend the delicate, the squeamish, and certainly the pious. Mr. O'Neill's language smites as swiftly as the red glare from the boiler-doors. Yet it is somehow tonic in its stark sincerity, and though it may quite truly play no small part in the startling quality of the play, the quality which brings you up in your seat like a slap in the face, it also is curiously devoid of mean suggestion, rousing

instead, a profound pity in all spectators who have imagination enough to grasp the significance of the drama

X Certainly, never on our stage has such use been made of the rank realism of vulgar speech, a use beside which such attempts at poetry as John Weaver's "In American" become trivial pipings. ~~We may say also quite as certainly, I think, No~~ such fusion of dialogue and scenery, of the intellectual, the emotional, the spiritual, and the pictorial, into a single thing which is only to be described by the word *theatrical*, has ever before been accomplished by an American playwright. One may call "The Hairy Ape" bizarre, one may call it tragic, or ironic, or gloomy, or terrible, or puzzling, or morbid, or sordid, or beautiful, or moving, or whatever else one's views and tendencies dictate, but one can not get away from it. Once in its grip, one's attention is as helpless to wander as was Yank to escape from the gorilla. In Eugene O'Neill the new art of the theatre in America has found the new playwright at last. To see "The Hairy Ape" is to see the bright promise of what is to come, not the pale reflection of what has been.

### ***The Hairy Ape***

*Patterson James*

The stark "realism" of "The Hairy Ape" justifies the elevation of Eugene O'Neill to the official position of Archpriest of the Unwashed Drama and pet divinity of its Unsoaped Patrons. But, like all "realists", Mr. O'Neill mistakes sensationalism for reality. The Provincetown Playhouse idea of naturalism in the drama is to make all the characters criminals or mental defectives, the scenes of the play the interior of a loaded garbage scow, and the language that of a waterfront bawdy house. In order to be "strong" enough to attract the sensitive nostrils of the insurgent playgoers above and below Fourteenth street the meat offered them must be "high". "The Hairy Ape" smells like the monkey house in the Zoo, where the last act takes place and where the play should have been produced. The stage presentation of the Neanderthal "man" is accompanied by outbursts of profanity which quite out-fetor all and any of Mr. O'Neill's previous efforts. "Christ!" seems to be his favorite expletive, while his conversation is lightened every other word by "Wot de hell!" He "God damns" the lady visitor from the promenade deck when she enters the stoke hole, throws his coal shovel at her with an air "You lousy tart", and calls the engineer, whose whistle is constantly calling for more steam, a "Belfast son of a Catholic bastard". "All of which is to be expected in a character like 'Yank', and it's use is courageous and strong and natural," chant the idolators. So are the wood-alcoholic ravings of drunken "deadhouse floaters". So are the obscenities exchanged between draymen caught in a traffic jam. So are hundreds of other things which happen in every-day life. So are the digestive processes of human beings. The latrine is not only a feature of organized sanitation, but it is made imperative by law.



What right or place has it in the theater on the stage? None, but we may expect its stage reproduction any night now.

A play by Mr. O'Neill, with the mise-en-scene in the entrails cleaning department of a stockyards slaughter house, would not surprise me in the least. I once saw a little girl, the daughter of the driver, sitting, while her father was making his house-to-house collections, atop of a swill-gathering wagon [on] a hot day in August calmly eating an ice cream cone what time the neighborhood reeked and the passers-by held their noses to avoid strangulation. That is the picture I have made of Mr. O'Neill in the daily throes of dramatic composition. No matter how vicious the stink he raises around himself and others he munches his ice cream cone undisturbed.

If we are to be annoyed with stage dialog like that with which "The Hairy Ape" is polluted to satisfy the demands of a Mr. O'Neill's "realistic" conscience, let us go the whole hog and not merely the hind quarters. Surely there should be no half-way measures in the Greenwich Village brand of realism. Cowardice should have no place in the makeup of the writers of drama for the insurrectos. If Mr. O'Neill wished to give us a real view of the firemen's forecandle, why did he not have the drunken inmates vomiting all over the place? Unless I have been badly misinformed, that is one of the painfully actual concomitants of too much tidewater licker and just as common as the language used by "Yank" Smith. Why strain at a gnat and swallow a cuspidor? Let's have it all—or not of it.

In the eagerness to shock the natives Mr. O'Neill (or the stage director) totally neglected some bits of real realism which should have been put in, and the neglect sticks out like a sore thumb.

The big scene of the play is the boiler room of the steamer. Before the fire doors stand the stokers stripped to the waist, the hairy ape, Smith, towering like a giant in their midst. As the curtain rises the roar of the engines swells, the doors are swung open, and the coal passers shovel in furious unison until the gang boss yells, "Enough." From the front there is a fine view of the fire-boxes, with their red coals and the grimy figures standing in the foreground. But the illusion is smashed like a clinker under a slice bar. The stokers shovel AIR into the blazing fires. What should be more foolish than the picture of firemen sweating and racing to the command of the engineer's whistle scooping up heaping lumps of nothing and feeding that into the hungry gullet of the boilers? The bunkers should be filled with piles of papier mache coal or black cotton balls. When the call for more steam sounds from the engine room "Yank" and his mates then can have something to pass into the fire. The fires, like any other fire, would be blackened for an instant by the fresh coal, but as the doors are closed long enough between times the black lumps could be raked out of sight and the fiery glow seen when they are opened again. But the necessity for thinking up unpleasant dialog was too great, doubtless, to permit of a little thought being given to perfecting a good idea.

Another bit of incongruity is the scene in which "Yank" encounters a Fifth avenue Sunday morning parade. One might suppose that the figures which roused his rage would be extravagantly dressed men and women. In-

stead of that they are manikins, with faces encased in masks, and all mincing upstage-downstage-upstage-downstage while the stoker empties the slop pail of his vocabulary over them. Even the cause of his arrest is an unworthy and unmanly attack on a clothing window dummy. How come such symbolism in our "realist"?

The last touch of irrationality is the taking off of the hairy ape by the gorilla in the Zoo. According to all well-regulated monkey house rules, visitors are not allowed to poke the animals, nor are the animals permitted to scalp the visitors as they pass by the cages. Also, the cages are bolted, barred and double locked. Mr. O'Neill has changed all that. In his zoo the gorilla's cage is left unlocked so that he can receive callers at all hours. All "Yank" Smith has to do is open the door, the gorilla walks out and crushes him to death. Just as easy!! Where the gorilla went after he cracked "Yank's" ribs is no business of Mr. O'Neill's. His responsibility ended when he left the cage unlocked.

Another bit of symbolism might have been introduced by showing the gorilla taking tea at one of the cellar dumps with which the immediate vicinage of the Provincetown Playhouse is broken out.

But "The Hairy Ape" is doing business. It is packing 'em in—literally—at the Palace of Macdougall Street. The night I saw the show the ventilation of any ship's fore-castle would have been sweet heaven over what had to be suffered. The audience at best was not alluringly savory—it never seems to be—and the standees in the rear of the building made the entrance of a solitary breath of fresh air an impossibility. Any suggestions that the doors be opened were sweetly but firmly vetoed. I heard one woman, who looked as if she was about to swoon, inquire of the doortender why the ban on clean air was so rigid.

"The people from uptown come down here to see our naked actors and you don't want 'em to take cold?" was the explanation given with an oleaginous grin.

That—in a mouthful—is the complete philosophy of the O'Neill school of playmaking. Give 'em something they don't see every trip to the theater, make it rough, and the gullible will make a path to your box-office. Mr. O'Neill has successfully capitalized the stoke hole. The gorilla of Broadway in its unlocked cage waits for "The Hairy Ape" to come uptown. I wonder whether it will kill with one ugly crunch or whether it will fall on the neck of "Yank" Smith and—kiss him? /18/

### ***All God's Chillun Got Wings***

*Arthur Pollock*

Eugene O'Neill's "All God's Chillun Got Wings," which has had almost as much publicity as a murder, finally made its way to the stage of the Provincetown Playhouse last night, where instead of causing a riot, it was greeted with

cheers and loud whistlings. Possibly if it had not been made so notorious its welcome would have been calmer. It is not a play to arouse great enthusiasm.

Certainly there had been no enthusiasm for it at the Mayor's office during the day, for the directors of the theater had applied for a permit to use a group of children in the first scene and the permit had been refused, no explanation being offered. The Gerry Society had approved, but not the higher authorities. No doubt it was expected that the refusal of the permit would prevent the play being performed, but the difficulty was easily sidestepped. James Light, who staged the play, merely read the first scene and the drama proceeded thereafter as if nothing had happened.

[This is the play, as every one now knows, in which a negro marries a white girl and is unhappy. Mr. O'Neill has taken a theme and illustrated it with seven scenes depicting as many stages in the progress of the miscegenetic romance. "All God's Chillun" is exposition rather than drama most of the time. It has its dramatic moments in the second act, but O'Neill can be heard explaining and expounding throughout the evening. It is sharp and pertinent analysis of the question of intermarriage between whites and blacks, its psychology is good, if palpable, it is more didactic than this dramatist has ever before attempted to be. Didacticism in O'Neill is not an improvement.]

Negro and white children play on the streets in the first scene, and there is no race prejudice to be discovered in their attitudes toward each other. Two of them are seen growing up in the following scenes, a colored boy and a white girl, and prejudice grows along with a sharp consciousness of it in the minds of the two. The girl is a worthless girl, the boy an ambitious youth. She is cast aside by a prize-fighter and, being alone in the world, is grateful to the negro for his adoration and marries him in order to have some one to love her sincerely. But she is white and he black, and neither they nor those they live among can forget it. Furthermore, she cannot blind herself to the fact that, save for her color, which gives her a sense of superiority, she is inferior to him. So all his ambitions to grow into a man of importance are thorns to her and she thwarts them as best she can. He tries to pass [an] examination that will admit him to the Bar and she gloats when he fails. By this time she has lost her sanity and, little, shallow, good-for-nothing that she is, she brings the play to a close by shrieking at him the word "Nigger." That, to her mind, sums up her feeling toward him, despite the fact that she loves him and is grateful.

Paul Robeson and Mary Blair, black and white, as advertised, play the leading roles. Mr. Robeson to us was a sad disappointment. He is an earnest, hard-working amateur and nothing more, apparently. During the first act he is merely a big awkward boy; in the second he loses part of his self-consciousness, a very natural self-consciousness under the circumstances, lets himself go and gives a good performance. Mary Blair is an actress who never proves quite adequate but is always improving. There are nice performances by Dora Cole and Lilian Green as the negro's sister and mother, an articulate piece of acting by a negro named Frank Wilson in the second and third scenes, and competent work by James Martin and Charles Ellis

Affectation still persists in the productions of Provincetown Players, and O'Neill is hardly free from it himself in this instance.

### ***All God's Chillun Got Wings***

*Ludwig Lewisohn*

Mr Eugene O'Neill has at last hit upon tragedy. He has the theme, the intensity, the terror and exaltation. All this will be missed by those who see the play through a curtain of words. Such words as miscegenation, for instance. It will be missed by those who indulge in sociological reflections. Mr O'Neill has fortunately gone much deeper.

He starts with a fact, a credible fact. There is the city slum, there is Jim Harris, there is Ella Downey. It is easy to object, 'Why mate a first-rate Negro with a third-rate white woman?' Because these are the facts. They are credible, they are nearly inevitable. Only this woman would have married a Negro in America today. Only this Negro, on the other hand, would have had both the mentality and the devotion. The woman has been flung aside by a scoundrel of her own race. Jim loves her and wants to save her. In her stark loneliness and misery she accepts. An educated woman would never have found herself in quite that position, an educated woman, even if it were conceivable for her to risk the consequences of this step, would never have revealed in sanity or madness what needed to be revealed, what is beyond all else the tragic theme—the immemorial, ineradicable character of race prejudice.

It is in revealing this dark and secret thing that Mr O'Neill reaches a height hitherto inaccessible to him. It is profoundly impressive and true that Ella was not happy in France since she took her soul and its memories and instincts with her, it is a master-stroke that she does not want Jim to pass his bar examination, since that would destroy the ultimate feeling of superiority to which she clings and which, she thinks, sustains her.

The case of Negro and White is a terrible case, an excessive one, a case surrounded with myth, fear, terror. But it does not stand alone. All deep divisions or supposedly deep divisions have a like effect. A Gentile wife at some moment of crisis muttering the word Jew under her breath, a French wife, in 1915, the word Hun—these are other symbols out of which comparable tragedies could have been built. And as Mr O'Neill's tragedy points to these others, so would those others have pointed to his. I do not mean that he has not very honestly and concretely dealt with his Negro man and his white woman. But the problem he has selected cleaves so near the bone of human life itself that it possesses a transcendent symbolic character. There are not many such themes in the world, this is one of them.

It is amusing to contemplate the state of mind of the people who were determined to be shocked by this play, of the critics who excused themselves for trying to view it objectively, of the Gerry Society which, at least for the

opening night, refused to issue the permit that would have made possible the performance of the prologue by white and colored children. It is amusing since all these things serve but to emphasize the truth of Mr. O'Neill's delineation of Ella Downey's soul. He created Ella Downey and at once found the world full of Ella Downeys.

The production of the Provincetown Players is notably fine, Mr. Paul Robeson is a superb actor, extraordinarily sincere and eloquent. Miss Mary Blair was a little halting in the earlier scenes; later she rose to the occasion and was literally thrilling at moments. I must not omit to mention excellent work by Frank Wilson and Dora Cole, nor the slum scene by Mr. Throckmorton, nor the directing of Mr. James Light. I have seen far more beauty and intelligence and mobility than there are in this production and this play. I have seen nothing that so deeply gave me an emotion comparable to what the Greeks must have felt at the dark and dreadful actions set forth by the older Attic dramatists. And these actions, too, had their origin in inexpugnable myth and ancient terror. /664/

### ***Desire Under the Elms***

*Fred Niblo, Jr*

Fortunately it is possible to praise the players without giving any undeserved credit to the play. Those who saw the opening of Eugene O'Neill's most morbid plumbing of the depths to which human nature can sink, at the Greenwich Village Theatre last night cannot deny that the cast of "Desire Under the Elms" is excellent—without exception. So much for the acting.

The play itself will be hailed as realistic. No one will call it an entertainment, but at the slightest suggestion of its foulness, many will rise to exclaim: "But that's life—that's real!" Sure. So is a sewer.

"Desire Under the Elms" is also gruesome to the nth degree. That is just another phase of its realism. The story is that of a covetous pack of New England farming folk, and the particular object of their avarice is a worthless farm. To do away with counter claims to its proprietorship, the boy in the plot pays off his two older brothers and sends them to California. His hard old father returns to the homestead, newly married to a lady who also covets the farm. To cut off the younger brother in her own favor, she promises to bear the old man a son, who, she hopes, will be the favorite. The son in time arrives—but it is the son of the boy. Upon learning of her deception, the boy decides to leave her. But by this time she has fallen in love with him, and to wipe out the effect of her lie to him and thereby hold his affections, she murders the baby.

Curious though it may seem, the boy doesn't take kindly to the baby's murder—in fact, in a frenzy of paternal grief, he summons the law. At last, however, he is loyal to her, declares himself a party to the act and the great lovers stalk heroically off in custody, for a final curtain.

Walter Huston plays Ephraim Cabot, the skinflint father, to perfection. Charles Ellis and Mary Morris are good in their lurid parts. Produced by the Provincetown group, "Desire Under the Elms" is effectively staged by Robert Edmond Jones.

This piece will possibly make money, but it is impossible for any one who cares anything about the theatre at all to approve of it—or even to disapprove silently.

### ***Desire Under the Elms***

*Stark Young*

"Desire Under the Elms," the first play by Eugene O'Neill to be produced since "Welded," was presented last night at the Greenwich Village Theatre and proved to be as unlike that drama as it was unlike "The Hairy Ape" or "The Emperor Jones." "Desire Under the Elms" reverts in character to the earlier "Beyond the Horizon," though it exhibits by comparison a fine progress in solidity and finish. It has less sentiment than this older piece and more passion, it is better written throughout, it has as much tragic gloom and irony but a more mature conception and a more imaginative austerity.

"Desire Under the Elms" is essentially a story of solitude, physical solitude, the solitude of the land, of men's dreams, of love, of life. The God behind the existence created on this New England farm is a harsh God, who is alone and is not understood. The minds of the people in this story are shaken and tinged with loneliness, with thwarted passion, with the trivial, the intense, the drab exaltation and denial of life. Underneath this solitude desire works, the redemption through love.

The children of old Cabot hate him. The youngest, the son of the second wife, remembers his dead mother, worked to death, and sees her about the place, risen from her grave. The father brings home a third wife. The two older sons go away to California; the younger stays and thinks to avenge his mother. In time he and the young wife come to love each other.

A son is born, which old Cabot thinks is to be heir to the farm, leaving the second wife's son adrift in the world. While a dance in honor of the new-born child goes on in the kitchen, the father and son quarrel outside; the son believes his father when he hears that the woman wanted a son only to cheat him out of the farm. He reviles her. To prove to him that it was the love of him and not the desire for the farm that had driven her to him, she kills the child. He runs off for the sheriff. The father turns the live stock loose in the woods and plans to go away, but when he finds the money gone from its hiding place, he believes that God another time has willed that he stand by the farm. The son returns from the sheriff's, he falls at the knees of the woman, takes part of the blame on himself, and they go away together to prison.

Robert Edmond Jones's setting for "Desire Under the Elms" was profoundly dramatic. The end of a New England farmhouse with its overhanging

elms was for all practical purposes built there on the stage, with a wall of actual stone coming down to the footlights, a scene that was realistic but at the same time strangely and powerfully heightened

The general performance of the play was usually adequate though not often on a level with the writing. Mary Morris, however, whose career as the fair Gertrude in "Fashion" last year was one of the flowers of the season's acting, played the wife in "Desire Under the Elms," with a new and suppressed method that deepened at times into an admirable poignancy and a kind of grim, thin poetry that seemed the exact truth of her lines. Charles Ellis, though his work in the earlier scenes was less successful or convincing, played with real poetry the passage where the boy is possessed with love for the woman and for his child. Walter Huston as the old man was everywhere trenchant, gaunt, ferid, harsh, as he should be in the part. In his ability to cover his gradations, to express the natural and convincing emotion, and to convey the harsh, inarticulate life embodied in this extraordinary portrait that Eugene O'Neill has drawn, Mr. Huston showed his talent and proved to be the best choice possible for the role.

The scene of "Desire Under the Elms" that best illustrates the highest quality of the play is that in which we see the dance going on, the father outside the house, the young wife and her lover in the upstairs room in each other's arms beside the child's cradle, a scene written with such poetry and terrible beauty as we rarely see in the theatre, a scene that for these qualities of poetry, terror and at the same time unflinching realism rises above anything that Mr. O'Neill has written.

### ***Desire Under the Elms***

*Joseph Wood Krutch*

In this age of intellectualized art there is an inevitable but unfortunate tendency to assume of Eugene O'Neill, as of every other arresting artist, that his greatness must lie somehow in the greatness or in the clarity of his thought, to seek in "All God's Chillun" some solution of the problem of race or in the "Hairy Ape" some attitude toward society; and then, not finding them, to fail in the fullest appreciation of the greatness which is his. It was not thought which drove him, as a young man, to seek adventure among the roughest men he could find, and it was not thought which he brought back from this and other experiments in life. Something tempestuous in his nature made him a brother of tempests, and he has sought wherever he could find them the fiercest passions, less anxious to clarify their causes for the benefit of those who love peace than eager to share them, and happy if he could only be exultantly a part of their destructive fury. It is a strange taste, this, to wish to be perpetually racked and tortured, to proceed from violence to violence, and to make of human torture not so much the occasion of other things as the *raison d'être* of drama, but such is his temperament. The meaning and

unity of his work lies not in any controlling intellectual idea and certainly not in a "message," but merely in the fact that each play is an experience of extraordinary intensity

Young-man-like, O'Neill first assumed that the fiercest passions were to be found where the outward circumstances of life were wildest and most uncontrolled. He sought among men of the sea, ignorant of convention and wholly without inhibitions, powerful appetites and bare tragedies, embodying his observations in the group of little plays now performed for the first time as a whole (and performed well) at the Provincetown Theater under the title of "S S Glencarn", but maturity has taught him the paradox that where there is most smoke there is not necessarily most fire. He has learned that souls confined in a nut-shell may yet be lords of infinite space, that spirits cabined and confined by very virtue of the fact that they have no outlet explode finally with the greatest spiritual violence. As though to signalize the discovery of this truth he has, in his latest play, "Desire Under the Elms" (Greenwich Village Theater), limited the horizon of his characters, physically and spiritually, to the tiny New England farm upon which the action passes, and has made their intensity spring from the limitations of their experience. Whether he or Robert Edmond Jones conceived the idea of setting the stage with a single permanent scene showing one end of the farmhouse, and of removing sections of the wall when it becomes necessary to expose one or more of the rooms inside, I do not know, but this method of staging is admirably calculated to draw attention to the controlling circumstances of the play. It is a story of human relationships become intolerably tense because intolerably close and limited, of the possessive instinct grown inhumanly powerful because the opportunities for its gratification are so small, and of physical passion terribly destructive in the end because so long restrained by the sense of sin. To its young hero the stony farm is all the wealth of the world, the young wife of his father all the lust of the flesh. In that tiny corner each character finds enough to stimulate passions which fill, for him, the universe.

<sup>1</sup>By half a century of unremitting labor Ephraim Cabot has turned a few barren hillsides into a farm, killing two wives in the process but growing himself only harder in body and mind and more fanatical in his possessive passion for the /578/ single object which has absorbed his life. Two of his sons, rebelling against the hopelessness of their life, leave him for the gold-fields, the third, who remains with him in dogged determination to inherit the farm, he hates, and so he marries once more in the hope of begetting in his old age a son to whom, as part of himself, he can leave his property without ceasing to own it. But he has reckoned without considering the possessive instinct of the wife herself, and so between the three, and in an atmosphere charged with hate, is fought out the three-cornered battle for what has come to be the symbol of earthly possessions. Love springs up between the wife and her foster son, but in such a battle the directest win, and love, confusing the aims of these two, dooms them to tragedy, while to the old man is left the barrenness of lonely triumph. Unlike the others, he has a god, the hard God who hates the easy gold of California or the easy crops of the West, the God



who loves stumps and stones and looks with His stern favor upon such as wring a dour life without softness and without love from a soil barren like their souls. And this God comforts him "I am hard," he says, when he learns that the baby, murdered by its mother, is not his but his son's "I am a hard man and I am alone—but so is God"

It may with some show of reason be objected that O'Neill's plays are too crowded with incident, that the imagination of the spectator refuses sometimes to leap with the author so quickly from tense moment to tense moment, or to accept violence piled so unremittingly upon violence, and his latest play is not wholly closed to such objection: but impetuosity is an essential part of his nature and not likely ever to be subdued To those who, like the present writer, can overlook it, it brings great compensation "Desire Under the Elms" will be, with one exception, the most moving play seen during the current season It is competently acted and Mary Morris and Walter Huston deserve special mention /580/

#### GENERAL CRITICISM

##### **"Eugene O'Neill"**

*Hugo Von Hofmannsthal*

It was at the Salzburg Festival last summer that I first heard the name of Eugene O'Neill. Max Reinhardt was producing one of my plays there: a sort of mystery, a synthetic or symbolic handling of allegorical material, mounted in a church There were a few Americans in our audience, who aroused my curiosity by relating merely the plots of "The Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape."

Some time after, I read both these plays, also "Anna Christie" and "The First Man" These plays and a few others, I am told, have placed Eugene O'Neill in the position of the foremost living American playwright. Judging from those of his plays with which I am familiar, his work is throughout essentially of the theatre. (Each play is clear-cut and sharp in outline, solidly constructed from beginning to end, "Anna Christie" and "The First Man" as well as the more original and striking "Emperor Jones" and "The Hairy Ape") The structural power and pre-eminent /39/ simplicity of these works are intensified by the use of certain technical expedients and processes which seem dear to the heart of this dramatist and, I may presume, to the heart of the American theatre-goer as well, for instance, the oft-used device of the repetition of a word, a situation, or a motive. In "The Hairy Ape," the motive of repetition progresses uninterruptedly from scene to scene, the effect becomes more and more tense as the action hurries on to the end. Mr. O'Neill appears to have a decided predilection for striking contrasts, like that for instance, between the life of the sea and the life of the land, in "Anna Christie," or between the dull narrowness of middle-class existence and unhampered

morality, in "The First Man" The essential dramatic plot—the "fable," that is—is invariably linked to and revealed by that visual element which the theatre, and above all, I believe, the modern theatre, demands. The dialogue is powerful, often direct, and frequently endowed with a brutal though picturesque lyricism)

In an American weekly publication I find the following judgment on Mr. O'Neill, written by an intelligent and very able native critic: "He has a current of thought and feeling that is essentially theatrical. Taken off the stage it might often seem exaggerated, out of taste or monotonous." To this just praise—for it is intended as praise—I can heartily subscribe. But the same writer goes on to say, however, that in this dramatist's best scenes there is a power in the dialogue that is found in only one work among thousands. Granting that this is true, it seems to me that the manner in which Mr. O'Neill handles his dialogue offers an opportunity for some interesting speculations of a general character on the whole question of dramatic dialogue.

In my opinion, granting the primary importance of the dramatic fable, or plot, the creative dramatist is revealed through his handling of dialogue. By this, be it understood, I do not mean the lyrical quality or rhetorical power; these elements are in themselves of little importance in determining the value of dialogue. Let us assume a distinction between literature and drama, and say that the best dialogue is that which, including the purely stylistic or literary qualities, possesses at the same time what is perhaps the most important of all the quality of movement, of suggestive mimetic action. The best dramatic dialogue reveals not only the motives that determine what a character is to do—as well as what he tries to conceal—but suggests his very appearance, his metaphysical being as well as the grosser material figure. How this is done remains one of the unanswerable riddles of artistic creation. This suggestion of the "metaphysical" enables us to determine in an instant, the moment a person enters the room, whether he is sympathetic or abhorrent, whether he brings agitation or peace, he affects the atmosphere about us, making it solemn or trivial, as the case may be.

The best dialogue is that which charges the atmosphere with this sort of tension; the more powerful it is the less dependent does it become upon the mechanical details of stage-presentation.

We ought not too often to invoke the name of Shakespeare—in whose presence we all become pygmies—but for a moment let us call to mind that Shakespeare has given us practically no stage-directions, everything he has to say is said in the dialogue; and yet we receive pure visual impressions of persons and movement; we know that King Lear is tall and old, that Falstaff is fat.

Masterly dialogue resembles the movements of a high-spirited horse: there is not a single unnecessary movement, everything tends towards a predetermined goal; but at the same time each movement unconsciously betrays a richness and variety of vital energy that seems directed to no special end, it appears rather like the prodigality of an inexhaustible abundance.

In the best works of Strindberg we find dialogue of this sort, occasionally

in Ibsen, and always in Shakespeare, as fecund and strong in the low comedy give-and-take scenes with clowns and fools as in the horror-stricken words of Macbeth

Measured by this high ideal, the characters in Mr O'Neill's plays seem to me a little too direct: they utter the precise words demanded of them by the logic of the situation, they seem to stand rooted in the situation where for the time being they happen to be placed: they are not sufficiently drenched in the atmosphere of their own individual past. Paradoxically, Mr O'Neill's characters are not sufficiently fixed in the present because they are not sufficiently fixed in the past. Much of what they say seems too openly and frankly sincere, and consequently lacking in the element of wonder or surprise: for the ultimate sincerity that comes from the lips of man is always surprising. Their silence, too, does not always convince me, often it falls short of eloquence, and the way in which the characters go from one theme to another and return to the central theme is lacking in that seemingly inevitable abandon that creates vitality. Besides, they are too prodigal with their shouting and cursing, and the result is that they leave me a little cold towards the other things they have to say. The habit of repetition, which is given free rein in the plot itself as well as in the dialogue, becomes so insistent as to overstep the border of the dramatically effective and actually to become a dramatic weakness.

The essence of drama is movement, but that movement must be held in check, firmly controlled.

'I shall not venture to decide which is the more important in drama, the driving motive-element of action, or the retarding or "static" element, at any rate, it is the combination, the interpenetration of the two that makes great drama. In Shakespeare's plays there is not a line that does not serve the ultimate end, but when one goes through the text to discover this for oneself, one perceives that the relation between means and end is by no means evident: the means seem tortuously indirect, often diametrically opposed to the end. Nineteen lines out of twenty in a comedy or tragedy of Shakespeare are (seemingly) a digression, an interpolative obstruction thrown across the path of the direct rays; retarding motives of every sort impede the onward march of events. But it is precisely these obstacles that reveal the plasticity, the vitality, of the story and characters, it is these that cast the necessary atmosphere about the central idea of the work.' As a matter of fact, the unity of the play lies in these diversified and apparently aimless "digressions."

If one goes through "Antony and Cleopatra" looking only for the chain of physical events, the hard outlines of the plot, and neglects the indescribable atmosphere of pomp and circumstance, the spectacle of the downfall of pride and the fulfilment of destiny, the contrasting colours of Orient and Occident, all of which is made manifest through the dialogue, what is left? Nothing more than the confusion and incoherence of nine out of every ten motion-picture dramas. Or if one consider the best pieces of Gerhart Hauptmann merely as samples of superficial naturalism, one would find them pedantic and weak in characterization. Or again, take the productions of /40/ the doc-

trinaire naturalists a good example is the dramatizations of the Goncourt novels. Thirty years ago these played a rôle of considerable importance, so far as theatrical history is concerned, but there is no life in them, nor was there when they were first produced, they suffer from lack of fresh air. Hauptmann's best plays, on the other hand, are bathed in it, it unifies and breathes vitality into them because it is the breath of life itself, transfused by that secret process which makes all great art, be it drama or canvas, giving it richness, variety and contrast. This is what the painters call "*le rapport des valeurs*"<sup>1</sup>. The plays of Strindberg are unified in this wise, not because of the bare plot on which they are built, but through the medium of an indescribable atmosphere that hovers somewhere between the realm of the actual and the dream-world.

The European drama is an old institution, laden with the experience of years, but as suspicious and watchful as a venerable though not yet impotent human being.

<sup>1</sup> We know that the dynamic element in drama is a vigorous element, eternally striving for ascendancy. But we also know that great drama is and always has been—from the time of Æschylus down to the present—an amalgamation of the dynamic and (shall we say?) "static" elements, and we are therefore a trifle suspicious of every effort towards the predominance of one element over another. The nineteenth century witnessed many such efforts, and each time great drama disappeared during the process. There is a constant danger that action—whether it masquerade as thesis-play or play of ideas, problem-play or drama of intrigue, or simply as the vehicle of a virtuoso playing with an anecdote—may prevail over the subtle and difficult but indispensable combination of dynamic and "static," the inseparable oneness of plastic form and action.

Sardou, the heir of Scribe, created a type of play the ingredients of which were entirely dynamic, action took the place of all else, and for twenty years Sardou dominated the stages of Europe, while his followers—the Sudermanns, the Bernsteins, the Pineros—have continued to dominate it to the admiration of the middle classes of all nations and the abomination of the artists! This was the type of play in which the personages were never guilty of any "irrational" exhibition of character. They were the fixed units in a sharply outlined plot, manipulated by the skilled hand of the playwright, and they passed their lives in rooms hermetically sealed against the breath of mortals.

Sardou coined an expression for his style of play "Life through movement," which was turned against him by his critics, who retorted "Movement through life." The critics were all true artists. Zola, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and their followers, among whom was the young Strindberg, but the most influential was Antoine, a man of the theatre.

But the pendulum swung back, and for the time being, perhaps, the European drama has gone too far in the opposite direction. It may be that this is

<sup>1</sup>*le rapport des valeurs*, the harmonious or sympathetic relation of values — Ed

the reason why the plays of so powerful a dramatist as Hauptmann are not popular outside Germany, for a large part of the German public is ready and able to listen to plays in which the "static" element is predominant, dramas in which psychological characterization and lyricism are of more importance than plot. Possibly this tendency is even a little overdeveloped.

Judged from this point of view, Hauptmann's plays are the exact antithesis of the plays of Eugene O'Neill. Where Mr. O'Neill reveals the first burst of his emotions in powerful, clean-cut pictures that seem almost like simple ballads in our complex world, Hauptmann applies himself to making his characters plastic; he does this by throwing a half-light over his men and women and allowing the values to appear slowly, to emerge in new and true and wonderful aspects, gradually shown through an accumulation of tiny and seemingly unimportant incidents of everyday life. As a result, Hauptmann's plots do not progress with directness or force; and at first sight his scenes appear to possess neither dynamic nor even truly "static" elements, they seem somewhat confused. But what ultimately strengthens these scenes and gives them the rhythm of life is a steady and unremitting infusion of the essence of life, which is soul. Hauptmann's method is that of Rembrandt the etcher, who works with a fine steel needle. Since Hauptmann continues to work in this fashion, he must necessarily give little thought to his audience, and indeed he is in actual danger of losing sight of them altogether. Meantime, he manages to accumulate so much of the spiritual life of his characters that his last acts are filled with an almost explosive force, so that there is no need for the introduction of any mechanical tension. Ibsen has done the same sort of thing in the last act of "The Wild Duck," and Ibsen is the master from whom Hauptmann has learned most.

In the case of Mr. O'Neill, however, his first acts impress me as being the strongest; while the last, I shall not say go to pieces but, undoubtedly, are very much weaker than the others. The close of "The Hairy Ape," as well as that of "The Emperor Jones," seems to me to be too direct, too simple, too expected; it is a little disappointing to a European with his complex background, to see the arrow strike the target toward which he has watched it speeding all the while. The last acts of "Anna Christie" and "The First Man" seem somewhat evasive, undecided. The reason for this general weakness is, I think, that the dramatist, unable to make his dialogue a complete expression of human motives, is forced at the end simply to squeeze it out like a wet sponge.

I have no intention of giving advice to a man of Mr. O'Neill's achievements, what I have said is not said by way of adverse criticism; it is rather the putting together of dramaturgical reflections inspired by a consideration of his plays. His qualities as a dramatist are already very great, and I have no doubt that he will make progress when, in the course of time, which is necessary to each man who creates, he shall have acquired better control over his materials, and above all over his own considerable talents. /41/

## TRIUMPH AND DECLINE: 1926 - 1934

By 1926, with his world-wide reputation as America's foremost playwright firmly established, O'Neill had abandoned his identification with "stark realism" and "sordid naturalism," but he continued to experiment with expressionistic and other stylized forms of dramaturgy. Moreover, he reduced the torrent of plays from his pen to an average of one a year and spent considerably more time on his central mystic theme of man's relationship to God. Critics continued to be bothered by his inability to settle into any uniform artistic pattern, although it was clear that the still young O'Neill was a serious artist bent on developing his often tragic themes by whatever theatrical device he felt appropriate. Then, just as he had seemed to reach his greatest heights and to have shown promise of truly magnificent works to come, O'Neill fell completely silent for twelve years and became virtually unknown to a new generation of playgoers.

The nine years from 1926 to 1934 witnessed the climax of Eugene O'Neill's career in the production of his two greatest plays up to that time, *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But in spite of his astonishing success with these two marathon dramas, he had not found the key to consistency, and there also appeared during this period the fascinating but enigmatic *The Great God Brown*, the amusing but somewhat outdated *Marco Millions*, and three of his most dismal artistic failures: *Lazarus Laughed*, *Dynamo*, and *Days Without End*. Ironically, this period also included O'Neill's most lastingly popular play and the one most produced by amateur groups everywhere—the nostalgic "comedy of recollection" *Ah, Wilderness!*

From his many personal notes and letters, it is abundantly apparent that during these nine years O'Neill devoted much more thought and painstaking labor to his major plays than he had ever done before. Revision after revision, covering years of effort, marked the development of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for instance. Some of the successes seem all the more remarkable in view of his own tormented personal life during these years and his never-ending search—from Bermuda to France to New York to Georgia and thence

to California—to find the best possible place to work. Despite his careful devotion to his art, O'Neill repeated his former distressing pattern of monumental success and colossal failure. To match the soul-searching apparent in *The Great God Brown*, the overwhelming portrait of womankind in *Strange Interlude*, and the power-laden Greek tragic force of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill combined a mask-smothered mystic Christianity with pagan Dionysiac elation in *Lazarus Laughed*, sent his wild-eyed protagonist ranting through a power plant to self-destruction in *Dynamo*, and delved into his own past in the embarrassingly personal *Days Without End*.

Following the almost universally ecstatic reception of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the widespread happy praise for *Ah, Wilderness!*, O'Neill presented only *Days Without End* before he disappeared completely from the New York stage. Many felt he had surrendered to a kind of romanticism and religious fervor that did nothing but harm his artistry, and the last two plays were taken as the mark of a decline. O'Neill's silence did not help his position, and during the next twelve years only rumors and counter-rumors came from his secluded homes on the Pacific coast. The deep wellspring of exciting, if often exasperating, theatre art seemed, momentarily at least, to be exhausted. It would not be revived permanently for another twenty-two years.

#### THE PLAYS OF 1926 - 1934

##### *Written:*

##### **1926**

*Lazarus Laughed*

##### **1927**

*Strange Interlude*

##### **1928**

*Dynamo*

##### **1929-1931**

*Mourning Becomes Electra*

##### **1933**

*Days Without End*

*Ah, Wilderness!*

##### *First performances:*

##### **1926**

*The Great God Brown*. January 23, Greenwich Village Theatre.

##### **1928**

*Marco Millions*. January 9, Guild Theatre. The first O'Neill production by the Theatre Guild, which then became O'Neill's exclusive producing company.

*Strange Interlude*. January 30, John Golden Theatre.

*Lazarus Laughed*. April 9, Pasadena Community Playhouse.

**1929**

Dynamo February 11, Martin Beck Theatre

**1931**

*Mourning Becomes Electra* October 26, Guild Theatre

**1933**

*Ah, Wilderness* October 2, Guild Theatre

**1934**

*Days Without End* January 8, Henry Miller Theatre

REVIEWS

***The Great God Brown***

*John Anderson*

O'Neill has ventured everything in his new play, "The Great God Brown," at the Greenwich Village, and has achieved a superb failure.

He has poured into it more than the stage can hold. His imagination has soared on wax wings too near the sun of dramatic illusion and, though he comes tumbling from the skies, it is a brilliant and thrilling fall, since he has dared greater heights than any other.

For here is one play that is two dramas about all the people in the world. There is a drama of people as they pretend to be and as they really are. It is a conflict of humanity, masked and unmasked, of shifting values, of hidden identities, of shy, frightened souls lurking behind the frozen faces of desperate pretense.

To capture these dual implications O'Neill boldly uses masks. They are not the stylized masks of custom, but careful duplicates of the faces of those who wear them, as individual as their own features but stiff with the rigidity of deathly life.

These grim mummies are put on and off throughout the play, changing its aspect when they are changed. A whole scene is transformed as a character slips out, his face naked and unashamed, to startle those about him with the sudden terror of reality.

Yet the mechanics of all this are not grotesque. It is a convention easy enough to accept in principle, and difficult only when the playwright carries it to an extreme of baffling complication by allowing one character to steal the mask of another he has killed.

As long as the personalities had demountable rims, so to speak, it was reasonable and exciting. But when they became as interchangeable as spare tires the whole play waded out beyond its depth as a stage drama and drowned magnificently in the seething theories of the playwright.

Without a huge diagram indicating when the masks are on and when they are off the story of the action can result only in serious misrepresentation. Yet this must be risked for the sake of even superficial discussion.

There are a woman and the two men who love her, one an artist hiding a



sensitive spirit behind a mask of reckless cynicism, and the other, unmasked until the middle of the play, a figure of successful worship, the eternal Babbitt. There is another woman, a prostitute when masked, but actually the earth mother

The artist dies and his mask is worn by the other man, who achieves by proxy the love of the woman the artist had married. And when this identity grows upon him he kills himself, flees from his own murder with the face of another, and is ultimately killed

Thus there are four deaths. The physical death of the artist and the survival of his personality. The death of the Babbitt personality and the survival of the physical Babbitt. Then the physical death of the Babbitt and the death of the artist personality.

Here the action is so swift and the changing values of identity so quickened that it is difficult to follow the turnings of the scheme. It seems utterly mad unless we are to suppose that the two men do not represent individual entities but merely different phases of the same person, the Jekyll and Hyde of one man, each with its mask.

This confusion destroys most of the dramatic effectiveness of the latter half of the play, yet leaves its power of absorption unslackened and undiminished. It goes terrifically on, long after the more theatrical qualities of it have perished.

For O'Neill has written his play with singing ecstasy and a blazing unity of vision which burns most of the obstacles in his way. They would have daunted a less daring poet. Single-eyed, he aims straight, and misses only in the inevitable diffusion of the theatre.

He has managed the play structure with amazing virtuosity. Each line in the dialogue is definitely characterized, each change of incident and mask copied in the nuances of the writing. It is fluid, sensitized, delicate in detail and rising at times to lyrical loveliness.

Somehow Mr. [Robert Edmond] Jones has managed to cast its spell completely upon the players, and they act it with high inspiration and an almost religious fervor. It is no slight task to make bodily gesture carry meaning while the face, the key to all emotion, is hidden and rigid. These actors do that and account for every shading in the script.

Mr. [Edward] Harrigan revealed peculiar insight into this problem of masked acting, broadening his gestures to compensate for the loss of facial play and achieving thereby a consistent and complete effect.

Mr. [Robert] Keith scored most heavily when unhindered by the mask, since his gesturing was weaker, but gave in these flashes of portrayals a fine and vivid impression of the character.

They were splendidly aided by Miss [Leona] Hogarth, as Margaret, the wife, and Miss [Anne] Shoemaker as Cybel, the earth woman, both of whom were adroitly cast and continuously effective.

To the casual majority of playgoers "The Great God Brown" means nothing at all. To the others it is the highest challenge the theatre, at the moment, has to offer.

### ***The Great God Brown***

*Brooks Atkinson*

What Mr O'Neill has succeeded in doing in "The Great God Brown," now to be seen at the Greenwich Village Theatre, is obviously more important than what he has not succeeded in doing. He has not made himself clear. But he has placed within the reach of the stage finer shades of beauty, more delicate nuances of truth and more passionate qualities of emotion than we can discover in any other single modern play. (The symbolism inherent in all his plays is now carried to its ultimate conclusion, dramatic substance is spun into fragile bands of meaning, the abstract conflicts of life are transmuted and thrice refined. By use of masks, personalities are distinguished from appearances, two realities are murdered and lost, while one distorted image of a being, a surface mask, remains apparently immortal.) From such piercing, critical probing of the soul is this drama constructed.

All this is patent in the current performance without being consistently intelligible. From the Olympian point of view, rather than the Broadway, one of Mr O'Neill's chief signs of strength is his absorption in the ideal as opposed to the practical. It is not his fashion to bargain with his dreams in the interests of black and white playwrighting. And now that he has striven to increase the stature of drama so that it may catch the full richness of his emotion, he puts a responsibility upon his audience too great and far too flattering. For two acts "The Great God Brown" makes its esoteric points with translucent clarity, and meanwhile pours a flood of powerful feeling across the footlights. When the masks for each individual increase from one to two in the remaining acts, and quick shifts are made from one to the other or from mask to real flesh, and the play cuts loose entirely from reality, the result is quite bewildering. Mr O'Neill will not blame his audience for begging the key to all this diffusion of figure, an explanatory note in the program might easily make thorough understanding possible. Indeed, if every line in the play did not ring with passion and sincerity, the complexity of this mode of expression might engender impatience in the mind of the playgoer. Even now it will certainly give rise to choleric differences of opinion. But a playwright may do whatever he chooses, the audience can register only its approval or disdain. In the presence of so much genuine honesty of purpose, one willingly concedes Mr. O'Neill the benefit of the doubt and merely observes that "The Great God Brown" is in large part inarticulate.

To place within the limits of a newspaper review an intelligible account of the details of so involved a play is, of course, quite impossible. (On the surface, "The Great God Brown" is a tragedy of love. Billy Brown loves Margaret. She, however, loves Dion Anthony, and marries him. It is Mr O'Neill's contention that she loves not the real Dion Anthony, a sensitive, bruised being, but a distorted image of Dion, a mocking, cynical surface appearance represented by Dion's mask. Beyond these simple facts, the

substance of "The Great God Brown" rests within the various personalities that come and go by clapping on or removing the masks. Only one of these personalities remains virtually constant—the mask of Dion that Margaret marries, and that she loves even when ultimately Billy Brown wears it. Once in the prologue Dion removes it in the ecstasy of passion, but Margaret recoils. She does not recognize him nor trust him again until he wears the appearance to which she is attached. Once long after their marriage Dion reveals his true self to her hungrily. But Margaret draws back affrighted. She never sees him unmasked again. Only a prostitute, the symbol of Mother Earth, sees Dion unmasked and keeps unmasked herself in his presence.

By such a device Mr. O'Neill multiplies the varieties of human emotion latent in his theme, and suffuses the whole in affecting tenderness. The contrasts between Dion seeking release for his soul agony in the sublime majesty of Scriptural instruction and Dion protecting himself with perverse cynicism in the presence of his wife are indescribably poignant. Complications set in, however, when Dion dies and wills his mask to Billy Brown, who has all these years cherished his love for Margaret. When Billy claps on Dion's mask, Margaret is quite deceived. And happier, for behind the familiar appearance is more warmth and youth than she had known in Dion. Up to this point, Billy has gone through the play unmasked. But now, in addition to Dion's mask, he fashions another mask representing himself in the familiar status of a successful business man. With bewildering versatility he changes from one to the other according to his absorption in business or domestic affairs, while the real Billy, in the flesh, unmasked, fades and finally dies. To recount further complications in this theme would confuse an already confused summary of the play. Mr. O'Neill has wrung every drop of passion from his drama and characterization.

(In the larger sphere of form "The Great God Brown" is a work of art, with a beginning, a middle and an end, with character development, and with a penetrating criticism of life. By predicating the tragedy with a prologue that introduces the parents of the main characters, and by appending to it an epilogue that reveals Margaret as a middle-aged woman and her three boys now grown to maturity, Mr. O'Neill gives his play the sweep of universality and the continuity of successive generations. Nor is the play itself the chronicle of three individuals. In the concluding act, when Billy Brown has breathed his last, an investigating policeman demands the victim's name "Man," says Cybel conclusively. And "How d'yah spell it?" the policeman demands as the final words of the play. For Mr. O'Neill does not write in one key. In the dialogue, as well as in the characterization, he modulates his theme freely. From passages of winged poetry he shifts quickly to mordant irony; from the abstract he passes to the concrete without missing a beat. And the implications of "The Great God Brown" carry us far afield among the cruellest uncertainties of a pleading, skeptical mind. Obscure or clear, "The Great God Brown" is packed with memorable substance.)

In a less sensitive performance, the play would be quite beyond human

understanding. The principal actors have been all well chosen. The personal radiance of Miss Hogarth in the part of Margaret contrasts wonderfully with the phlegmatic countenance of her mask. Similarly in the part of Dion, Mr. [Robert] Keith imbues his acting of the real man with an interior distress that sets off the surface mockery of his mask. Mr. [Edward] Harrigan gives body to the part of Billy Brown. As Cybel, the prostitute and the symbol of Mother Earth, Miss [Anne] Shoemaker plays with an extraordinary pity, understanding and gentleness.

### **Marco Millions**

*Kelcey Allen*

The river of time has journeyed on to a significant confluence of theatrical forces when the Theatre Guild Acting Company, the foremost and most articulate group in the country, in producing "Marco Millions" at the Guild Theatre, offered for the first time in its history a work of the foremost American dramatist, Eugene O'Neill. Except for an early O'Neill play which the Washington Square players, progenitors of the present Theatre Guild, once produced, no recognition was accorded O'Neill by the Theatre Guild until last night, although he is perhaps the lone American dramatist whose works are relished by sophisticated and cultured Continental palates.

Last night was one of the most eventful we ever spent at the theatre. First, as to the dramatic literature of "Marco Millions"—it is a coruscating satire, biting in its irony, suffused with poetry, rich and dramatic in its simple story, and resplendently colorful in its background, atmosphere and imagery. "Marco Millions" is a many faceted jewel. Although he has chosen for his theme the quasi-historical and fabulously legendary Marco Polo and his sojourns in the empire of Kublai Kaan, imperious ruler of Cathay in the 14th century, O'Neill aims the stinging shafts of his irony, and the rapier-thrusts of his corroding wit at contemporaneous foibles.

With mellow and gentle irony, he travesties the inquisitive instincts, the cupidity, the high-voltage salesmanship type of civilization developed in the Occident. We feel he is constantly poking fun at American philistinism, American money-grubbing and money-wallowing. He has made of Marco a smug idol of overstuffed self-sufficiency, whose ideals are tinged with a metallic luster and resound with a metallic clang.

Through the character of the Polos, he contrasts with expert craftsmanship the acquisitive urge in the West, its stress on the welter of mass and quantity and volume, as opposed to the serene gravity, the poised dignity and infinite wisdom of the Orient. As we mine deeper, we find many more nuggets of gold. In a mere glancing fashion, and with great compression, O'Neill satirized the mythical, not the ethical, basis of all religions by showing that the respective devotees, priests and dervishes, who worship at different shrines, believe in the same common myths, and yet Confucians,

Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians and Taoists all claim supremacy of their own beliefs, not recognizing their origin from a common progenitor in comparative mythology

O'Neill satirizes the obtuseness of the worshippers of Mammon. He brilliantly portrays the blunted sensibilities, the spiritual hump, as he terms it, of young Marco, the man of action, and kinetic energy, the idol of material efficiency, who has not the more rarefied and delicate poetic instinct to perceive that a Cathaian princess yearns for him.<sup>1</sup>

On the physical facets of "Marco Millions," the Guild must have lavished a prodigious sum in costumes, scenery and background. Lee Simonson has eminently well succeeded in suggesting the opulence of the Orient. In the cataract of color, the hues and tints have been selected with admirable taste. They are never overgaudy to the point of flamboyance, never splotchy or variegated, but always harmonious both in costume and in background. The colors have also been chosen for their symbolic and dramatic values, for they always aptly represent with artistic fidelity the mood in which a particular scene is cast. This sumptuous production could have done justice to the most ambitious extravaganza of our musical impresarios. On the aesthetic side, "Marco Millions" is a wondrous achievement, as each picture in this rich kaleidoscope of Oriental beauty is a canvas of rare beauty in itself.

In one respect, we were somewhat disappointed. When the direction was assigned to Rouben Mamoulian, the Armenian youth who manipulated the seething and frenzied mobs of "Porgy" with such virtuosity, we thought the Guild in "Marco Millions," too, would resort to mass movement to show the teeming East. But this mass phase had to be restrained and subdued by the exigencies of production and the compulsory excisions from the O'Neill text to compress "Marco Millions" into a one-night play.

We missed somewhat the frenetic huddle of the courts of Persia, India and Cathay, but Mamoulian did extraordinarily good work in suggesting stage multitudes paying homage, or making obeisance of carrying out peremptory orders of the high-powered Marco.

If the waits between scenes could have been eliminated by some Reinhardtian<sup>1</sup> wizardry, or by the witchcraft of stagecraft, and one scene melted into another so as not to interrupt the illusion this wondrous production of "Marco Millions" might have been made even more wondrous.

"Marco Millions" is acted with the consummate histrionic skill of the Guild. Alfred Lunt again established that he is one of the greatest of American actors. As the callow lad Marco, at the court of Tedaldo, Papal Legate to Acre, Lunt acts with the droll loutishness, the adolescent hesitancy of an immature gauche youth. As Marco rises in power at the Court of Cathay, Lunt's self-assertiveness and self-adulation increases. He taps all the rich veins of humor and irony the role contains. In the scene revealing his obtuseness on the score of the passion of the princess, in the many scenes

<sup>1</sup>Max Reinhardt (1873-1943), Austrian theatre director famous for his elaborate stagings, which incorporated great size, large numbers of people, and magnificent decor — Ed

where he is the high-voltage commercial traveler, in his quotation of bromidic platitudes, in the scenes in which he sells Kublai Kaan the idea of paper money and the potent usage of gun powder, Lunt acquits himself masterfully

Margalo Gillmore was the beautiful princess Kukachin, and no aids of stage illusion were necessary to encompass her wan beauty, her delicacy of spirit, her mild, yearning gentility of mood

Baljol Holloway, in his resplendent robes as the regal Kublai Kaan, was magnificent as the heart-wise and thoughtful man in the purple. Dudley Digges, as the sage of Cathay, yielded the serene and sagacious philosophy of the East by the unruffled mien of his acting, the inscrutable mask of his thoughtful expression

Such others as Morris Carnovsky, Henry Travers, Ernest Cossart, H H McCollum and Mary Blair, regrettably have to be lumped together for lack of time and space all in one paragraph of general commendation, though the work of each is deserving of more detailed praise

### ***Strange Interlude***

*John Anderson*

O'Neill's nine-act dramatic marathon occurred in the John Golden Theatre yesterday, when the Theatre Guild presented "Strange Interlude" at an afternoon and night session which took a total of five hours to pass a given point. As matters of possibly historical importance it may be reported that the survivors, at the end, seemed in good health, though withered, and that Mr. Otto Kahn and Professor Max Reinhardt achieved the ultimate in sartorial nicety by changing to dress clothes during the dinner hour, while others, less favored, merely changed the subject.

And the subject, in case there should be any unbeaten doubt after so long a siege, is life, that strange interlude in which, O'Neill says, "we call upon past and future to bear witness that we are living."

His play is as large and as long as that to catch its meaning. As large as life, and long enough to make an audience, which had seen the characters age and turn grey before its eyes, dodder at last into the midnight streets, a sort of synthetic Rip Van Winkle, astonished, perhaps, at finding it still 1928, if, since I haven't verified it, this still is

But the bare physical endurance of the author and his players is the least of "Strange Interlude." Admit that it is an ordeal by watered dialogue; admit that its sprawling size does, at times, convict O'Neill of reckless waste and artistic laziness—call it even vain of its own huge bulk, and yet, and yet it does manage to be profoundly engrossing, with the hypnotic fascination of seeing four people live out their tangled and twisted lives against a background of their own motives, and to the spoken chorus of their own thoughts.

For O'Neill, as in his mask-play, "The Great God Brown," has again burst the seams of the theatre in stretching for deeper meaning and sharper truth. His scheme is to have the characters utter not only the conventional speech of conversations, but also what is in the back of their minds, to speak not merely words, but thoughts.

It is a cumbersome, and sometimes a ridiculously awkward procedure, managed mechanically by a change in voice, and the sudden halt of all motion on the stage, so that the scenes take on, intermittently, the jerky attitude of a self-starting wax works. Though of minor importance the method is splendid for comedy, since the blurting out of hidden feelings provides an edge of rudeness that is inescapably funny in the theatre.

Much of this Freudian chorus, indeed, most of it, seems both irrelevant and in the way, not to mention the fact that O'Neill has arbitrarily, and with a selection which he failed to use on the rest of his material, tied all of it directly to the ordinary conversation of the play. That is, he shows his characters always thinking about what they are doing and saying, whereas those who make a practice of using their minds know that they have a nasty habit of wandering all over the subconscious, and unearthing, perhaps, in the gravest crisis some silly notion about something altogether else.

With this elaborate structure O'Neill tells the story of a woman and three men who are, in her eyes, her father, her husband and her lover. She marries one to forget a dead aviator she once loved, and has a son by another when she finds that her husband's family is tainted with insanity.

In this calamitous melodrama he tortures all four with such searing woe, lashes them with so many fierce relationships out of their writhing inhibitions and agonizing complexes that his play wails upon the taut nerves and quivering emotions of clinical psychoanalysis. Its taut momentum sends it screeching to a dizzy climax where long-buried secrets and smothered pain at last cry out for the plain relief of utterance.

Out of this hulk of storm-tossed life he wrenches his own philosophic musings, and sings them as ever in the lyrical ecstasy of affirmation. He pieces together a romantic religion out of the bones of science, and reaches across pagan biology to make a god of life.

He did it before in "The Fountain" when Ponce de Leon found death in the spring of eternal youth, and in "Great God Brown," but never before with such exhaustive and exhausting questioning, never before with such unwinking courage, or such passages of soaring poetry.

Here is, truly, a play of heft and thought enough to set aside the usual boundaries of the stage, boundaries in which a dramatist is supposed to explain his people fully by their own talk and actions, to reduce a whole character to its essential words, and so tie those words into action that drama comes out of the lives on the stage.

O'Neill dared to go outside such limitations, and the Guild, in accepting the challenge, has given production to a play which, in spite of its serious defects, remains the most provocative and interesting event of the season, and probably the most significant contribution to the American drama.

Heavy burdens are, naturally, imposed upon the actors, since their parts are more than twice the length of ordinary roles, and much more baffling to the memory, because the "thinking out loud" sections are often without literal coherence

Space and time are too short to do more than suggest the vitality and sustained brilliance of Miss Fontanne's playing in the principal part, or to report with what repressed intensity and adroitness of understanding Mr. Anders portrays Darrell

Mr. [Jo ] Mielemer has provided lovely settings, Mr. [Philip ] Moeller has given it sensitive and often splendidly effective direction, and the audience gave it perhaps the most patient and consecutive ear ever assembled in this town, even if one croupy old lady near your reviewer did seem to think that she was a member of the cast and spoke her thoughts right out, as if they might have been no more than subtitles.

### *Strange Interlude*

*Joseph Wood Krutch*

The first question which one would naturally ask in connection with O'Neill's magnum opus has already been triumphantly answered by the production which the Theater Guild has given it The extraordinary length of the drama and the curious method by which it is developed have both been justified by the fact that it has proved itself eminentlyactable, and the size of the audiences which it is attracting demonstrate in the directest possible manner that it has the primary virtue of being consistently interesting To be profitable, all future discussions of the play must, I think, be concerned only with the nature and extent of its excellence, since it is indisputably excellent in some fashion and to some degree

If the distinction of O'Neill were primarily intellectual it might be possible to /1/ give some hint of the quality of his work by outlining its action, but his thinking is not, perhaps, superior to that of half a dozen contemporary writers and the story which he tells of a woman who absorbs the lives of three men in order to compensate herself for the lover whom she has lost might mean anything or nothing It is great chiefly because of the passion with which it is recounted and the largeness which its personages are made to assume; because its characters, though drawn from modern life and treated in a rigorously critical fashion, attain, nevertheless, to heroic proportions instead of dwindling, as most characters in modern drama do, into triviality; and because, in a word, O'Neill has the power, common in many ages but extremely rare in this, of making human emotions seem cosmically important

Tragedy, said Aristotle, is the imitation of noble actions, Comedy the imitation of ignoble ones, and though most of the tragedies which we still read have been written since his definition was formulated there is only one



respect in which we need to modify it "Imitation" seems to us a rather naive word for the description of any artistic process, and we fumble about for one which seems to us more exact, speaking now of "interpretation," of "expression," or of "form" in our effort to describe how the artist, instead of merely imitating nature, interposes himself between us and it in order to give us a version which involves something of himself, but we must still hold essentially to the criterion of Aristotle. A tragedy is a work which treats man as though he were noble, a comedy a work which treats him as though he were ignoble, and it is the chief distinction of O'Neill that he is capable of doing the former.

The Freudian psychology furnishes the most disillusioning and pettifying point of view from which human nature can be viewed, it seems to rob man of the last vestige of his dignity by tracing his most powerful feelings to the most trivial causes and it makes it impossible for him to trust the integrity of those emotions upon which his sense of his greatness is founded. And yet O'Neill, working, though he does, in part at least, from this point of view, nevertheless succeeds in making his personages seem important. Every one of the major characters in "Strange Interlude" is the victim of a fixation which tethers him, as it were, to a fixed point from which no struggle can remove him further than the length of the cord by which he is attached, but because O'Neill's intellectual realization of the predicament of his characters is accompanied by an emotional comprehension of the problems of that character as they appear to himself they retain something of that greatness of which an analysis, taken by itself, would have robbed them. Tragedy is possible only when man is seen, not as he would appear in the light of omniscient knowledge or in the perspective of eternity, but as he appears to himself. It implies that his emotions be presented at their own valuation, and O'Neill is one of the few men living who can still do just that.

Nina Leeds has lost, under particularly painful circumstances, a lover whom she has never possessed. Out of her need to compensate for his loss she develops a mystical and grandiose philosophy as the result of which she holds captive three men each with a history which makes him her predestined victim, and the catastrophe to which the whole play leads is that precipitated by the characters' increasingly clear intellectual comprehension of the nature of their predicament. Its theme may be said to be concerned with the relation between the mighty emotional experiences of the characters and the intellectually contemptible causes which give rise to them, and its greatness to consist in the extent to which both aspects are realized. O'Neill sets a psychological analysis of his characters beside a direct presentation of their passion and thus asks by implication one of the most characteristic and important of modern questions. Are the emotions of mankind to be evaluated with reference to their origins or merely with reference to their magnitude as emotions?

From the standpoint of technique "Strange Interlude" is, of course, of the very highest interest. It succeeds by means both of its unusual length and its novel uses of spoken thought in presenting upon the stage a kind of story

hitherto capable of being treated in the novel alone, and it may possibly establish a new kind of dramatic writing if others can be found to master its form as O'Neill has mastered it. Yet the importance of the play considered as an isolated work does, nevertheless, consist essentially in the fact that it approaches, as perhaps no other modern play approaches, true tragedy without imitating Greek or Elizabethan forms and without adopting any archaic point of view. It arrests and startles its auditors because it moves them in a new way of making possible for moderns something which must be analogous to the experiences undergone when the great tragedies of the past were not only great as literature but intimately related to the spirit of the age which produced them, because, in short, it treats modern life in a fashion convincingly heroic. There are many dramas written during the twentieth century of which it may be truthfully said that they are interesting, subtle, or true, of what other contemporary play can it be said that it is also and in all senses of the word "great"?

### *Lazarus Laughed*

H O Stechan

Third in the series of strikingly different plays, written by Eugene O'Neill last year, is *Lazarus Laughed*, which the Pasadena Community Players have had the privilege of introducing to the stage.

In form *Lazarus Laughed* is a Greek tragedy, while the import is not unlike the mystery plays which used to be done during the Middle Ages. The story undertakes to reveal what O'Neill believes followed the raising of Lazarus from the dead by Jesus.

Being the first man to return from the realm whose boundary is never supposed to be recrossed, the multitude hangs upon Lazarus' words. He tells them that there is no death—only God's eternal laughter. That is the burden of the whole play. The succeeding scenes represent a series of tests by the Jews, Romans and Greeks to try Lazarus' faith. In turn the various members of his family are taken from him, but he continues ever to laugh, even to the end when Emperor Tiberius has him burned at the stake.

O'Neill's point seems to be to demolish the idea of the grim reaper of time-honored Christian theology. Men may die, he infers, but Man never does, wherefore life is eternal. Continuous laughter is the symbol. It runs thruout the entire play, not always being convincing, and at times even sounding forced to the point of silliness. Whether *Lazarus Laughed* is all that O'Neill enthusiasts claim for it time alone can tell. Some hail it as the greatest philosophical drama since Goethe's *Faust*. Only 100 years hence will determine that.

Under the direction of Gilmor Brown the Pasadenans have made an elaborate production of *Lazarus Laughed*. Only the voluntary co-operation of hundreds of workers of the organization giving their services made it possi-

ble Loving hands worked on the costumes, the art department of the University of California contributed the several hundred masks which form one of the grotesque features of the play

A unit setting, designed by James Hyde, was manipulated for all eight scenes Its proportions were such as to dominate the play at all times Altho the script does not call for a musical score, one was provided by Arthur Alexander, which added to the emotional effect What might otherwise have been rather tedious scenes, the music lifted perceptibly.

Irving Pichel, formerly director of the Santa Barbara Community Arts Players, was cast for Lazarus. He played him in a stereotyped Christ-like manner, which hardly seems to be the Dionysian sort of man the author had in mind At best it is a difficult role to tax the skill of the most experienced actor. Victor Jory portrayed Caligula rather bizarrely and was liked best of the large cast by many Others acquitting themselves with credit were Lenore Shanewise, Dore Wilson, Maurice Wells, Max Turner and Richard Menefee

From a production standpoint *Lazarus Laughed* must be hailed as an achievement more than compensating what it lacked in the way of satisfactory acting. Several hundred supernumeraries contributed to the mise en scene, which was effectively handled, colorfully costumed, and for the most part notably lighted For any little theater group to be able to visualize with any degree of satisfaction a brand-new O'Neill drama is little short of an accomplishment The play's final worth as drama will remain for more seasoned players to establish It is so heavily freighted with philosophical subtleties and long speeches as to call for much more experienced playing /11/

### ***Dynamo***

*Robert Garland*

Last night, in the Martin Beck Theatre and under the personal supervision of no less an organization than the Theatre Guild, Eugene O'Neill shook his fist at God and blew kisses in the general direction of Electricity. Each of the gestures seemed a wee bit childish

In a lengthy and lugubrious letter to George Jean Nathan, Mr O'Neill's father confessor, the author of "Dynamo"—for such is the piece's name—points out that his latest invention is "a symbolic and factual biography of what is happening in a large section of the American soul," a sort of dialogic picturization of what is supposed to be going on in the innermost sanctuary of Tom, Dick and Harry.

What is more, it is the first play of a trilogy in which Provincetown's pet playwright promises to "dig at the roots of the sickness of today" as he himself feels it, a sickness brought about by the "death of an old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the

surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in"—if you know what Mr O'Neill means

We moderns, it seems, are groping, groping for something with which to "comfort our fears of death" In an effort to relieve our alleged anxiety, Mr O'Neill is in process of bringing forth the trilogy of which I have written. It is a trilogy which will eventually include last night's "Dynamo," tomorrow's "Without Ending of Days" and next week's "It Cannot be Mad" After "It Cannot be Mad" everything will be dandy

When the curtain rises at the Martin Beck Theatre you see the open faced houses of the Lights and the Fifes. The Lights, quaint creatures, believe in the manly God of their fathers The Fifes, supposedly atheistic, believe in a female god known as Electricity

Talk, rather than complications, ensues Mr Light, a clergyman, hymns the praises of his own particular deity Mr Fife, an electrician, hymns the praises of his own particular deity. Mr Light's God is a god above all other gods Mr Fife's god is a god above all other gods Mr Light's family agrees with Mr Light Mr Fife's family agrees with Mr Fife And so it goes

So it goes for two acts out of three Nothing crops up that the intelligent schoolboy of eighteen, nineteen or twenty has not figured out for himself. Nothing crops up that is either interesting or new Nothing crops up that your nephew at Exeter would not settle by asking "What difference does it make whether you speak of God as God, Electricity, The First Cause, Big Boy or Dynamo?"

And as it goes, Mr Light's wayward son loves Mr Fife's wayward daughter But, before he gets himself beautifully burned on Lee Simonson's artificial dynamo, Mr Light's wayward son prays "Our father which art in power houses" And before she gets herself beautifully shot on Lee Simonson's artificial platform, Mr Fife's wayward daughter has a pretty tough time

Perhaps you get the impression that Mr O'Neill's "Dynamo" irks me It does. It seems so self-consciously profound, so Provincetownian, so phoney, so remarkably like the Oh-the-Pity-Of-It sketch in "This Year of Grace" at the Selwyn

But for the production which the Theatre Guild has given it I have nothing short of praise Mr Simonson's settings are both imaginative and helpful Even a great American playwright should be thankful for them And Philip Moeller's direction is skillful. So skillful is it, so *fortissimo* with the good spots, so *piano* with the poor, that Mr Moeller's mind would be interesting to read.

And the acting is canny and worth while As Mr Light's wayward son, Glenn Anders could scarcely be improved upon. Any member of the actors' union who can fall down on his knees and worship a paint-and-canvas hydro-electric plant and keep his face straight is not to be belittled In years and years of theatregoing the stage has known no finer fool

As the God-fearing parson's bride, Helen Wesley is herself again As Ramsay Fife, whose goddess is Electricity, Dudley Digges is well rounded

and secure As Mr Fife's wayward daughter, Claudette Colbert depends no longer on her legs As Mr Fife's missus, Catherine Calhoun Doucet sings "I'd love To Be a Dynamo" without smiling To my mind, "Dynamo" is merely Tom Paine's "Age of Reason" in not too modern dress Only the late lamented Mr Paine had a sense of humor

### ***Dynamo***

*Percy Hammond*

It is the probable intention of Mr O'Neill's "Dynamo" to demolish not only the Old Time Religion but its substitutes, atheism and science, as answers to the riddle of this atom of the universe. As seen by him the three of them fail in their endeavor to unlock the secret, and he leaves us at 11:10 p. m. as much in the dark as we were at 8:50 All of the popular solutions are futile in "Dynamo," from Holy Writ to Electricity The powerhouse is, as unsatisfactory a source of knowledge, according to Mr. O'Neill, as is the fundamentalist chapel, or the bench of the fool who saith in his heart that there is no God But, while further mystifying us in our gropings to find light from the Drama, Mr. O'Neill makes "Dynamo" an astonishing play It is sometimes ludicrous, frequently raving, often encumbered with laborious "interludisms," and generally an entertainment for the the rarer play-goer. Mr O'Neill and the Theater Guild encourage us by a program announcement that he will continue his examination of "to-day's sickness" in dramas entitled "Without Ending of Days" and "It Cannot Be Mad"

Living in theatrical propinquity to one another are the families of Rev Hutchins Light (George Gaul), a hellfire and brimstone parson, and Ramsay Fife (Dudley Digges), a mean and scornful unbeliever The son of the evangelist (Glen Anders) is enflamed by the daughter of the scoffer (Miss Claudette Colbert), providing sex-appeal for those Theater-Guilders who like a little romance in their clinical entertainments. Hardby their adjoining cottages in a small town in Connecticut is a hydroelectric plant, whose wheels throughout the play give forth a siren hum. For reasons not too clearly advertised, the preacher's boy suddenly goes daft He has been a moony fellow, but his meditations so far as Mr O'Neill tells us have not been along the lines of the cosmic mysteries All at once, and in the midst of a stage thunder storm, he turns upon God with startling blasphemies, calling Him an "old Bozo" and daring Him, in the familiar manner of Mr Sinclair Lewis, to strike him dead.

Thereafter he follows electricity as his Master and gets a job in the village power-plant. Here, he thinks, is the real deity. Though to more unseeing persons it is but a minor Public Utility, to him it is idol, shrine and laboratory He goes crazy in his worship of it. He kneels in fanatic prayers before its dynamos and utters frenzied shrieks of worship. Miss Colbert, in a leggy red dress, tries to distract his attention from the machinery to her own poetic person, and she succeeds in doing so in a scarlet interlude hidden by a vir-

tuous curtain When he realizes that he has been untrue to Electricity he shoots her and then kills himself in as vivid an exhibit of electrocution as has been seen since New York journalism photographed the Sing-Sing finish of Mrs Snyder

It seemed last evening that Mr. O'Neill had overdone the "aside" device and had used it more lavishly and with less excuse than in "Strange Interlude" He employed it to announce facts as well as to expose mental processes and the characters often were engaged in talking to themselves when they might better have been speaking to each other and the audience The scheme last evening was a crutch rather than an inspiration . Mr Digges as the shirt-sleeved unbeliever, was, as always, a fine actor, Mr. Anders let himself go maniacally as the futile wanderer among Mr O'Neill's spaces, Miss Colbert was snappy and decorative as the sex-interest, and Mr Gaul played the preacher, accurately, in the fashion of the old and eloquent member of the Lambs Club.

Miss Catherine Calhoun Doucet's endeavors to make a bitterly humorous role comic were excessive, and therefore successful, and there was the usual Guild excellence of production and direction to make "Dynamo" better than it really was

### ***Mourning Becomes Electra***

*Brooks Atkinson*

Mr. O'Neill gives not only size but weight in "Mourning Becomes Electra," which the Theatre Guild mounted at its own theatre for the greater part of yesterday afternoon and evening The size is a trilogy that consumes six hours in the playing The weight is the formidable earnestness of Mr O'Neill's cheerless dramatic style To him the curse that the fates have set against the New England house of Mannon is no trifling topic for a casual dramatic discussion, but a battering into the livid mysteries of life Using a Greek legend as his model, he has reared up a universal tragedy of tremendous stature—deep, dark, solid, uncompromising and grim It is heroically thought out and magnificently wrought in style and structure, and it is played by Alice Brady and Mme. [Alla] Nazimova with consummate artistry and passion Mr O'Neill has written overwhelming dramas in the past. In "Strange Interlude" he wrote one almost as long as this trilogy. But he has never before fulfilled himself so completely, he has never commanded his theme in all its variety and adumbrations with such superb strength, coolness and coherence. To this department, which ordinarily reserves its praise for the dead, "Mourning Becomes Electra" is Mr. O'Neill's masterpiece.

As the title acknowledges, "Mourning Becomes Electra" follows the scheme of the Orestes-Electra legend which Æschylus, Sophocles and Euripides translated into drama in the days of Greek classicism. Like the doomed house of Atreus, this New England family of Civil War time is

dripping with foul and unnatural murder. The mother murders the father. The son murders his mother's lover. The mother mercifully commits suicide. The daughter's malefic importunities drive the son to suicide. It is a family that simmers with hatred, suspicion, jealousy and greed, and that is twisted by unnatural loves. Although Mr. O'Neill uses the Orestes legend as the scheme of his trilogy, it is his ambition to abandon the gods, whom the Greeks humbly invoked at the crises of drama, and to interpret the whole legend in terms of modern psychology. From royalty this story of vengeance comes down to the level of solid New England burghers. From divinity it comes into the sphere of truths that are known. There are no mysteries about the inverted relationships that set all these gaunt-minded people against one another, aside from the primary mystery of the ferocity of life. Students of the new psychology will find convenient labels to explain why the mother betrays her husband, why the daughter instinctively takes the father's side, why the son fears his father and clings to his mother, why the daughter gradually inherits the characteristics of her mother after the deaths of the parents, and why the son transfers his passion to his sister. As for Mr. O'Neill, he has been chiefly concerned with the prodigious task of writing these modern plays.

And through three plays and fifteen scenes he has kept the rhythm of his story sculptural in its stark outline. The Mannon curse is inherited. For this fine New England mansion was built in hatred when the Mannons cast off the brother who had sinned with a French-Canadian servant. Her son, Captain Brant, comes back into their lives to avenge his mother's dishonor and he becomes the lover of Ezra Mannon's wife. From that point on "Mourning Becomes Electra" stretches out as a strong chain of murders and revenge and the house of Mannon is a little island walled round with the dead.

There are big scenes all the way through. Before the first play is fairly started the dance of death begins with Lavinia upbraiding Christine, her mother, with secret adultery. Christine plotting with Captain Brant to poison her husband on the night when he returns from the Civil War, Christine poisoning her husband and being discovered with the tablets by Lavinia as the climax to the first play, Lavinia proving her mother's guilt to Orin, her brother, by planting the box of poison tablets on the breast of her dead father and admitting her terrified mother to the chamber of death, Lavinia and Orin following their mother to a rendezvous with the captain on his ship and murdering him in his cabin; Lavinia forcing her brother to suicide and waiting panic-stricken for the report of his pistol, Lavinia in the last scene of the last play sealing herself up with this haunted house to live with the spectres of her dead—all these are scenes of foreboding and horror.

Yet "Mourning Becomes Electra" is no parade of bravura scenes. For this is an organic play in which story rises out of character and character rises out of story, and each episode is foreshadowed by what precedes it. Although Mr. O'Neill has been no slave to the classic origins of his tragedy, he has transmuted the same impersonal forces into the modern idiom, and the production, which has been brilliantly directed by Philip Moeller, gives you

some of the stately spectacle of Greek classicism Lavinia in a flowing black dress sitting majestically on the steps of Robert Edmond Jones's set of a New England mansion is an unforgettable and portentous picture Captain Brant pacing the deck of his ship in the ringing silence of the night, the murdered Mannon lying on his bier in the deep shadows of his study, the entrances and exits of Christine and Lavinia through doors that open and close on death are scenes full of dramatic beauty. To give you perspective on this tragedy Mr. O'Neill has a sort of Greek chorus in Seth, the hired man, and the frightened townsfolk who gather outside the house, laughing and muttering. Mr. O'Neill has viewed his tragedy from every side, thought it through to the last detail and composed it in a straightforward dialogue that tells its story without hysteria.

As Mr. O'Neill has mastered his play, so the actors have mastered their parts and so Mr. Moeller has molded the parts into a measured, fluent performance. Miss Brady, as Lavinia, has one of the longest parts ever written. None of her neurotic dramatics in the past has prepared us for the demoniac splendor of her Lavinia. She speaks in an ominous, full voice that only once or twice breaks into the splintery diffusion or artificial climaxes. Lavinia has recreated Miss Brady into a majestic actress. As Christine, Mme. Nazimova gives a performance of haunting beauty, rich in variety, plastic, eloquent and imaginatively transcendent. Lee Baker as the Mannon father conveys little of the towering indomitability of that part and lets his death scene crumple into mediocrity. Earle Larimore plays Orin from the inside with great resource, elasticity and understanding. As Captain Brant, Thomas Chalmers has a solid body to his playing. There are excellently designed bits by Arthur Hughes and Erskine Sanford as townspeople. Philip Foster, and especially Mary Arbenz, give able performances as a brother and sister.

For Mr. O'Neill, for the Guild and for lovers of drama, "Mourning Becomes Electra," is, accordingly, an occasion for great rejoicing. Mr. O'Neill has set his hand to a tremendous story, and told it with coolness and clarity. In sustained thought and workmanship it is his finest tragedy. All that he fretted over in the past has trained him for this masterpiece.

### ***Mourning Becomes Electra***

*John Mason Brown*

For exciting proof that the theatre is still very much alive, that it still has grandeur and ecstasy to offer to its patrons, that fine acting has not disappeared from behind the footlights' glare, that productions which thrill with memorability are still being made, that scenic design and stage direction can belong among the fine arts, and that the Theatre Guild, in spite of any causes for discouragement it may have given in the past, is still the most



accomplished as well as the most intrepid producing organization in America, you have only to journey to the Guild Theatre these nights and days, and sit before Eugene O'Neill's new trilogy, "Mourning Becomes Electra."

It is a play which towers above the scrubby output of our present-day theatre as the Empire State Building soars above the skyline of Manhattan. Most of its fourteen acts, and particularly its earlier and middle sections, are possessed of a strength and majesty which are equal to its scale. It boasts, too, the kind of radiant austerity which was part of the glory that was Greece.

It is one of the most distinguished, if not the most distinguished, achievements of Mr. O'Neill's career. It is—as the dull word has it—uneven, but so—as the no less dull retort phrases it—are the Himalayas. It has blemishes which are obvious, especially as it reaches its third section. But it remains to the end a magnum opus beside which "Strange Interlude" and most of the earlier, simpler plays sink into unimportance. For it is an experiment in sheer, shuddering, straightforward story-telling which widens the theatre's limited horizons at the same time that it is exalting and horrifying its patrons.

It finds Mr. O'Neill forgetting the pseudo-scientific jargon of *Mother* and the mystic laugh of Lazarus, dispensing with such special technical devices as masks and asides, and writing without any hindrances of form as an emotionalist. And as an emotionalist, who knows how to dramatize the curdling rancors of hate, the surging of thwarted passion, and the taut demands of murder, he has no equal in the contemporary theatre.

As his title makes very clear, Mr. O'Neill's concern is with one of the grandest, most spine-twisting tales of murder that the theatre's history knows. It is, in short, the *Electra* story that he is retelling in more or less modern terms, substituting the white pillars of a country house in Civil War New England for the Doric columns of ancient Argos.

Mr. O'Neill's play, in other words, is a testing of his strength with that fable of the luckless house of Atreus which Æschylus first treated in the "*Oresteia*," which Sophocles and Euripides both dealt with in their respective "*Electras*," and which such a modern as the late Hugo von Hofmannsthal vulgarized into a Reinhardtian guignol of lights and leers and snake-like gestures.

It is, ~~as every one knows~~, a story of revenge, a saga of the way in which fate calls upon Electra and her brother Orestes to avenge the murder of their father, Agamemnon, by slaying their wicked mother, Clytemnestra, and her no less wicked lover, Ægisthus. It is a myth which all three of the great tragic dramatists of Greece have told in their own way, taking their own liberties with its details, distributing the emphasis according to their own sensing of its moral and dramatic values, and managing to make it decidedly their own in each of their independent retellings.

Mr. O'Neill, needless to say, has taken even greater liberties with this classic myth than any of his ancient predecessors dared to do. But by taking them, he has made the story very much his own, without robbing its terrible sequence of catastrophes of either their force or their essential outlines.

Unlike Sophocles and Euripides, who contented themselves with the

writing of a single play about the "recognition" of the long-separated Electra and Orestes, and the murder of Clytemnestra and Ægisthus, ~~Mr.~~ O'Neill has turned to Æschylus for the model of "Mourning Becomes Electra." Like that earliest of Greek tragic writers, ~~Mr.~~ O'Neill has chosen to give the story in full, to prepare for its coming, to catch it at the height of its action, and to follow his avengers (he follows both Electra and Orestes) past the awful deed fate has demanded of them to the time when the Erinyes (or Furies) are pursuing them.

Accordingly, just as Æschylus divided his "Oresteia" into the "Agamemnon," "The Choëphoroe, or Libation Pourers" and "The Eumenides," so

O'Neill has divided his "Mourning Becomes Electra" into three parts that bear such ~~Bulwer-Lytton~~ titles as "Homecoming," "The Hunted" and "The Haunted." Contrary to the example of Æschylus, and much more according to the practice of Sophocles and Euripides, ~~Mr.~~ O'Neill gives his trilogy to Electra. It is she who dominates its action and fuses it, even as Orestes fused the Æschylean original into one long play—with pauses—rather than three separate dramas.

Mr. O'Neill's Agamemnon (Lee Baker) is Ezra Mannon, a hard unbending New Englander, who has been off to the Mexican War in his youth, who has studied law, been a skipper, achieved great success in business and served as Mayor of the small town in which his family is outstanding. His Clytemnestra (Alla Nazimova) is Christine, a foreigner who has long been out of love with her husband and who has now come to hate him.

Their children, Lavinia (Alice Brady) and Orin (Earle Larimore), are, of course, the Electra and the Orestes of Mr. O'Neill's piece. While old Ezra Mannon has been away from home, winning the praise of General Grant for the military abilities he has shown as a brigadier general in the Civil War, his wife has had an affair with a Captain Adam Brant (Thomas Chalmers), the Ægisthus of "Mourning Becomes Electra," who in this case is the illegitimate son of a wayward Mannon who has brought shame on his family.

Lavinia, who has also been in love with Captain Brant, follows her mother to New York, learns of her infidelity to her father, and resolves to break off the affair. She confronts her mother, makes her promise to see no more of Brant, and prepares to welcome her father and brother home from the war. Meanwhile Christine has already confided in Brant that their one way to happiness lies in the death of Ezra, who stands between them.

She is prepared to murder him, and murder him she does by taking advantage of the heart trouble from which he suffers. Not only does she bring on one of his attacks by naming her lover to him but she offers him as a medicine the poison Brant has sent her. Lavinia comes into her father's room just before he dies, hears him accuse her mother, sees the powder she has administered, and resolves to take justice into her own hands in avenging his death.

Both Lavinia and her mother fight for the love of Orin, but he, like the spineless Orestes of Sophocles and Euripides, soon falls under the domination of Lavinia. She proves her point to him by leading him to the clipper

ship Brant commands and there shows him their mother in Brant's arms Thereupon Orin kills Brant when his mother has left him, she commits suicide when she learns of her lover's death (thus sparing us the mother-murder of the Greeks), the ghosts of the dead who refuse to die haunt Orin and Lavinia, Orin shoots himself and Lavinia forswears the happiness her impending marriage might have brought her, has the shutters nailed down on the Mannon house and locks herself inside it to atone during the rest of her life for the sins of her family

As Mr O'Neill rehandles this venerable story it preserves its awesome fascination It emerges, as it has always emerged, as one of the most gripping melodramatic plots in the world It also comes through its present restatement as a tragic melodrama of heroic proportions The poetic beauty the Greeks gave it is lacking in Mr O'Neill's prose modernization. But the dilemma remains, and so does much of the agony and exaltation that belong to it

Mr O'Neill's treatment of it is vigorous with the kind of vigor our theatre rarely sees. It is stark, unadorned and strong It has dignity and majesty And nearly the whole of it is possessed of such an all-commanding interest that one is totally unconscious of the hours its performance so freely consumes

That it is longer than it need be seems fairly obvious, as does the fact that, like so many of O'Neill's plays, it stands in need of editing It is at its best in its first two sections, and most particularly in its fine middle portion But its last part seems overlong and lacks the interest of its predecessors It marks the same falling off from what has preceded it as the "Eumenides" does from the "Chæphoroe" Deprived of plotting that sweeps forward to a climax and dealing with the conscience-stricken course of its avengers, it goes a tamer, more uncertain way. Nor is it helped by the incest motive Mr O'Neill has added to it It rises to the very last act of all, however, to a final curtain that is Greek in its whole feeling and flavor

The production the Guild has given "Mourning Becomes Electra" is one of the most successful feats in the Guild's long career. It has been superlatively well directed by Philip Moeller, with a fine eye for pictorial values and a shrewd sense of pace. Robert Edmond Jones has done his best work in recent years in his settings for the trilogy. They have the sort of luminous beauty at which he, more than any of our designers, excels They are simple in details, rich in their atmosphere, and strong in their lines. They are, in fact, the ideal backgrounds for a tragedy that is touched with greatness. The white columns Mr Jones has given the Mannons' country home, and the steps below them on which Lavinia and Christine sit, are constant and exciting reminders of the fact that the house of Mannon, of which Mr O'Neill writes, is vitally connected with the house of Atreus.

Mme. Nazimova's Christine is superbly sinister, possessed of an insidious and electric malevolence, and brilliant with an incandescent fire. As Lavinia Miss Brady gives the kind of performance her admirers have long been waiting to see her give It is controlled It has the force of the true Electra

And it is sustained throughout as long and severe an actor's test as any player has been called upon to meet. The moments when she stands dressed in black before the black depths of Mr. Jones's doorways are moments that no one can forget who has felt their thrill. Mr. Larimore's Orin is a vivid picture of frenzy and weakness.

There were flaws here and there in last night's performance, details which were not quite right, and a few scenes which were slightly muffed. But the lack of flaws was far more remarkable than their presence. Be that as it may, "Mourning Becomes Electra" is an achievement which restores the theatre to its high estate. It is an adventure in playgoing that no wise lover of the theatre will be so foolish as to deny himself.

### ***Mourning Becomes Electra***

*Eugene Burr*

*Mourning Becomes Electra* (or, if you care for subtitles, *Down the Centuries With Eugene O'Neill*) is the long-awaited trilogy by America's First Dramatist, which the Theater Guild rapidly presented at 4 o'clock Monday afternoon and kept on presenting until late Monday night. As everyone—including the Scandinavian—must know by this time, it is composed of three plays concerning the same characters, each play a separate dramatic entity or at least intended to be so by the author, but if anyone tells you you can enjoy the evening's entertainment without having been present at the afternoon's, leave him quickly. The three parts are intertwined in theme, treatment, plot and everything else.

✓ The plays are an adaptation and modernization of the Electra theme which the ancient Greeks handled more briefly and (may curses be upon the head of the blasphemer!) a great deal better. In O'Neill's hands the locale is shifted to New England, the time is shifted to the period immediately following the Civil War, and the audience is shifted out to supper and back to the theater again during the almost unending course of the action. The Guild is presenting the show (a three-ring circus it is, with a few extra rings to go under the eyes of the customers) as both the second and third productions of its 14th subscription season. It could present it as an entire season in itself and this corner would certainly not argue about it.

It might be overrash to state that Mr. O'Neill's *Mourning* is a good one-acter stretched into 14 acts, but it is definitely a good three-act melodrama pulled out to a marathon by an author who takes himself too seriously, by an author who wastes his own and his audiences' time by delving into morbid psychology that is just as unreal, just as fundamentally unimportant—and certainly as unentertaining—as the sentimentality that is *verboten* by his devotees. It is this taking of himself too seriously which is, at bottom, the cause of all the unnecessary turmoil at the Guild. When in brief intervals, such as the grandly effective scene that is laid on the deck of a clipper,

O'Neill forgets his self-seriousness and writes straight meller, he is splendidly effective and moving, bringing back the days of those fine earlier pieces which were done before he was saddled with the realization of being America's First Dramatist

For *Mourning Becomes Electra* is really just meller, meller like, say, *Payment Deferred*, only far less ably written and with far less real ability to move the emotions of an audience. The magnificent acting makes it occasionally stirring, but for long, long, stretches one merely watches the twisted puppets of Maestro O'Neill going thru their prescribed paces without feeling much more than a perfunctory interest in what they are going to do.

Your reporter realizes that all of this is going to be set down as rank heresy and also as rankly untrue. Intelligent faces will bob out of the dark at him to exclaim that they were profoundly moved. But those intelligent faces will be talking thru their probably just-as-intelligent hats. O'Neill, digging and searching thru the muck and scum of the human soul, emerges with his muddy monstrosities, proudly exhibiting them to a breathless world as something real and fundamental and profound. They are actually none of those things. They are far from ordinary human experience; profound, possibly, if we mistake abstruse unearthing for profundity, but certainly neither fundamental nor real, and they are utterly incapable of waking ordinary human reaction in a theater—at least as O'Neill presents them. They utterly fail to plumb the depths of emotion and experience, they are merely very special cases of abnormal psychology placed upon a stage and given pretentious platitudes to mouth, platitudes that reach profundity in the popular mind merely because they have been written by O'Neill.

These same characters, treated as the melodramatic figures that they are, might have been powerfully effective. But, smothered in the author's voluminous spadings from the back of the human mind, they lose their true and original values, assuming false ones that are never borne out by fact.

It is the seriousness with which O'Neill takes himself and with which he is taken by almost everybody else that indirectly imparts those false meanings. The trilogy, written as an unknown's first attempt, would be considered the arresting but misguided outpourings of a playwright who had still to realize the comparative importance of his various values. But, coming from O'Neill, it is all sacrosanct. Audiences going to the show are self-consciously intelligent, and the whole affair assumes the aspect of an event. The customers did everything but stand up and sing a hymn yesterday afternoon before the curtain rose on the first play.

Getting belatedly to the plot, ~~it details~~ (and how it details!) the story of Lavinia Mannon, who seeks to keep her father's honor while her mother galavants about with a sea captain. Father is away fighting the Civil War, and things are further complicated by the fact that Vinnie wouldn't mind having the captain for herself. She forces her mother to throw over the lover, and the older woman, wild with the only love that has reached her life since the bleak dawn of her honeymoon, plans to murder the father on his return. She manages to do it, undetected by any but Lavinia, and the first act ends

with Pa Mannon dead in bed, Ma Mannon in a faint on the floor and Vinnie prostrate upon her knees. And the audience can go out for supper, leaving a body-strewn stage.

The second play features the return from war of Orin, Vinnie's brother, between whom and his mother there was always a powerful bond. Vinnie tells him of the liaison and the murder, and proves her statements when she takes him to follow Ma Mannon on a visit to the captain's ship. Orin waits until his mother has gone, shoots the sailor to avenge family honor and then goes back home with the news. His mother sees the stark and horrible passing of the love to which her starved life has clung, goes quietly into the house and shoots herself.

The third play shows Orin going mad with remorse for having indirectly murdered his beloved mother, and Vinnie, her stern duty to the family code completed, out to live, live, live! She engages herself to a good-looking young swain, but Orin follows his mother along the suicide route, the ghosts of the dead rise up to confound Vinnie's stern sense of justice, and she breaks her engagement, shutting herself up forever with the evil past in the grim and moldering house of Mannon.

That's all there is to it, but O'Neill tells it with minute attention to every emotional detail and with his usual complete incompetence in even the fundamentals of decent play-making. As an example, his "planting" in the first scene is the most obvious since the days when butlers would talk to telephones in order to let the audience in on the plot. And the play, so long that its genuine emotional values are lost and foundered in the surging and disordered sea of distracting detail, is padded unconscionably. It is complicated with overtones, such as the captain's relation to the Mannons, that have no bearing on the fundamental plot. Its outlines are buried deep, and the whole thing is far too long and too diffuse—too minutely occupied with abstruse psychological states—to leave a single, lasting impression.

All of this, however, doesn't mean that it won't be popular. The splendid cast alone should make it so, with Alice Brady turning in a grand performance as Lavinia, Earle Larimore doing well by Orin, the minor parts all being in capable hands and Nazimova rising to almost unscalable heights as the mother. Nazimova, in fact, turned in so sustained an emotional performance that it must be seen to be believed.

*Mourning Becomes Electra* will, unless the \$6 price and the early opening work against it, be popular in spite of all. Audiences bored stiff will probably stay to the bitter end and go home to tell their friends how magnificently stirring, how classically inevitable, how superhumanly splendid it all is—merely because it happens to be by America's First Dramatist. If they—and he, too—would only forget for a while that he is America's First Dramatist, he might again turn out a good play, a stirring play, a play that would create a single lasting impression instead of going beyond all possible human endurance thru its diffuseness and the self-conscious iconoclasm of its author. /19/

***Ah, Wilderness!****Brooks Atkinson*

As a writer of comedy Mr O'Neill has a capacity for tenderness that most of us never suspected "Ah, Wilderness!" with which the Guild opened its sixteenth season last evening, may not be his most tremendous play, but it is certainly his most attractive. How much of it is autobiographical this column is not prepared to say just now, but obviously it is Mr O'Neill's attempt to recapture past life of which he is fond. All the characters are beguiling, at least two of them are admirable and lovable. And toward them Mr. O'Neill's point of view is full of compassionate understanding.

As a Connecticut father of the year 1906, Mr Cohan gives the ripest, finest performance in his career, suggesting, as in the case of Mr O'Neill, that his past achievements are no touchstone of the qualities he has never exploited. On the whole, Mr O'Neill's excursion into nostalgic comedy has resulted in one of his best works. His sources are closer to life than the tortured characters of "Mourning Becomes Electra." His mood is mature and forgiving. Now it is possible to sit down informally with Mr O'Neill and to like the people of whom he speaks and the gentle, kindly tolerance of his memories.

In a large small-town of Connecticut in 1906 lives an ordinary American family. They are typical in their humors and vexations. They are average folk faced by average problems, and they have the strength to solve them. What concerns them most in "Ah, Wilderness!" is the youthful fervor of Richard, who is a senior in high school and a rebel. He reads Swinburne, Shaw, Wilde and Omar Khayyam, and his mother worries. He is an incipient anarchist, he hates capital and his father looks disturbed. He is also passionately in love with a neighbor's girl, and means to marry her. The scraps of Swinburne verse that he sends to her alarm her father, who forces her to break with Richard in good, melodramatic style. Being young and arrogant, Richard runs amok to spite her, and gets tight in the presence of a painted lady. His father and mother are sure that the world has come to an end. But the damsel manages to prove her devotion at a moonlit rendezvous on the beach and Richard is himself again. After everything has been settled naturally, the father and mother begin to remember that once they were young.

That, in brief, is the fact of the story. But it hardly communicates the warmth of pity that floods through the play. For undistinguished as the legend may be, Mr O'Neill has given it distinction by the fervor of his emotion. He not only likes these bughouse folk, but he understands them, and particularly in the last act in the scene between the son and the father he has caught all the love and anguish that such relationships conceal. The roistering scene in the back room of a small hotel bar is commonplace enough. Some of the domestic scenes are hackneyed, and the progress of

"Ah, Wilderness!" lacks the drive of Mr O'Neill's tragic war horses<sup>1</sup> But his recognition of the tortures of adolescence, and the petty despairs of small-town life, bring him closer to most of us than any of his other plays have done \*

As a writer of comedy he is no gag buffoon The lines that draw laughter from the audience cannot be detached from the play for isolated quotation But his attitude toward his characters is lightened with a sense of humor Part of the humor rebounds from the costumes of 1906—the flat straw hats, striped flannel trousers, long coats, high collars that the young blades wear in their frivolities, and the monstrous automobile garb needed for Fourth of July motoring. Part of the humor comes from the intellectual timidities that we persuade ourselves were typical of that day<sup>2</sup> Nat Miller falteringly talking sex to his son is one of the funniest episodes in this fable There is an undercurrent of humor in all the dilemmas of the Miller children and in all the familiar jars of family life in the sitting-room and over the dinner-table But if Mr O'Neill's approach to Richard's torment of eager, youthful problems is not humorous it is fraught with humanity, and it is alternately poignant and disarming<sup>3</sup>

The Guild has risen to the occasion nobly Mr Moeller's direction is supple, alert and sagacious, and Robert Edmond Jones's settings recognize the humor in the stuffy refinement of 1906 As Nat Miller, the father, Mr Cohan gives a splendid performance Although that adjective is exact, it seems hardly enthusiastic enough for the ripeness and kindness and wisdom of his playing He is quizzical in the style to which we are all accustomed from him, but the jaunty mannerisms and the mugging have disappeared For the fact is that "Ah, Wilderness!" has dipped deeper into Mr Cohan's gifts and personal character than any of the antics he has written for himself Ironical as it may sound, it has taken Eugene O'Neill to show us how fine an actor George M. Cohan is

As Richard, Elisha Cook Jr has strength as well as pathos Mr Cook can draw more out of mute adolescence than any other young actor on our stage. Marjorie Marquis is excellent as a troubled, normal mother Gene Lockhart is capital as her amiable and bibulous brother As the spinster who refused him sixteen years ago, Eda Heinemann is also uncommonly good There are good performances of other parts by William Post Jr, Adelaide Bean, Walter Vonnegut Jr, Ruth Gilbert, Richard Sterling, John Wynne and Ruth Holden And in spite of its dreadful title, "Ah, Wilderness!" is a true and congenial comedy. If Mr O'Neill can write with as much clarity as this, it is hard to understand why he has held up the grim mask so long /28/



**Ah, Wilderness!***Gilbert Gabriel*

Last night the Theatre Guild began its sixteenth season by presenting Eugene O'Neill's new play, *Ah, Wilderness!* This morning all the dolts in creation and criticism will be remarking that O'Neill has turned Tarkington. But then, we shall have at once to add, as a matter of truth, news, and salutation, that *Ah, Wilderness!* gave us an evening of slyly superfine delight, and that it and its cast's chief visitor, George M. Cohan, met the première's crowd on terms of inexhaustible pleasantness and friendship.

(O'Neill himself, so I hear, explains *Ah, Wilderness!* as "a comedy of recollection." Comedy is all it pretends to be—a very native American folk-comedy, with none of those cosmic rumbles to which folk plays are usually prone—and recollection certainly is in it, all around it, permeating it as happily as the smell of drench lilacs in the garden of any grown man's half-forgotten youth.

But so light a mood it has, so smiling and benevolent and utterly optimistic a meaning, I make bold to wonder whether it isn't also entitled to be called a comedy of recantation.)

For here is the cavernous eye of O'Neill doing nothing except twinkle. And here are at least six or seven of the former O'Neill's pet tragic situations—of misunderstood boyhood, for instance, and of gentleman and prostitute, and of drunkard and spinster—all treated to the very opposite of their old-time terror and tears, all given the benefit of a quiet but unmistakable and contagious chuckle.)

Or perhaps this new O'Neill is self-displayed chiefly to confound the few who still thought that the old O'Neill dealt only in overtones and no good humor. Little as they deserve the pleasure, let these go sit in the front rows now.

Early in his dramatic career O'Neill was already recounting "the background of real life behind my work" as proof "that I have not written out of the top of my head." And in *Ah, Wilderness!* he is obviously again recalling one of the first chapters of that background, and writes it out of the bottom of his heart. There is a light of such paternal kindness, an aureole of such genial nostalgia, hung around the young high school lad named Richard Miller in this new play, you are bound to know him as a creature of autobiography, and to recognize Richard as Eugene in search of his lost youth.

In "a large small-town in Connecticut" (could it be New London, where O'Neill himself was once a cub reporter and columnist, and where the famous James, his father, had long had a Summer home?) in the year of innocence of 1906, *Ah, Wilderness!* is set. It is all strictly domestic, in spite of one barroom spree scene, and all wistfully reminiscent of the days when family life was the life.

Editor Nat Miller of the town paper, Mrs. Miller, a couple of adult in-laws, and the four Miller children . . . these are the staple goods of the play. A few other youngsters and oldsters tread on the fringe of it, sloe-ginning,

spooning, full of the prose and patter of perfectly sensible, ordinary people, in benevolent contrast to Richard, the Millers' second son, the Millers' problem-child, the Millers' poet-in-their-midst

But there's no special coddling or unhumorous pity for this Junior O'Neill. He is just young Dick, not Young Woodley. He reads Ibsen and Shaw on the sly, he spouts Swinburne and Kipling at the wrong moment—and to the wrong people—and he is as gangly and ornery as he [can be].

Young Richard is the fond, fuzz-covered young histrion that all sadly middle-aged men have to admit that they, too, were in their prep-school Galahad days. He is you, I, all of us at the damnfool age of seventeen—provided we were seventeen somewhere around the jog-trot year of 1906, before youth was labelled flaming.

Young Richard has made the social error of sending some too fervid poetical quotations to his best girl. Called to account by two family heads, he celebrates this Independence Day by swanking off with a college chum to prove his manhood in the most sordid resort in town. But his evil intentions fail as fast as his good. Afraid of the cheap little female chippie, thrown out of the barroom for being under age, he comes home at awful midnight to give an exhibition of first souse before the entire outraged family, and to be swished off ingloriously to bed.

Next day brings rewards: clean romance and katzenjammers, and a gentle but abysmal lecture from Dad on the subject of 1906 morality and social hygiene. Maybe 1933 is wiser as well as worldlier, after all.

But, anyway, there's a tender spray of moonlit sentiment between good boy and good girl, and a benediction of moonlight over the parents, too. "I can only remember a few nights that were as beautiful as this," says Dad, "and they were long ago, when your mother and I were young and planning to get married." And only a little while thereafter, with a snatch of the Rubaiyat practically sung to "Silver Threads Among the Gold," the curtain comes down on the Familia Miller of Smalltown, Connecticut, one-score-and-seven years ago.

Outside the theatre, a hitherto unheard-of honor, the Guild throws George Cohan's name up in large electric letters. In fair exchange for which Mr. Cohan presents the Guild with the best performance most of us have ever seen him give, either in his own plays or anybody's. A performance heart-deep in fatherly wisdom and humanity, as honest as natural, and thoroughly understanding, masterly spoken throughout. He and the boy, played by Elisha Cook, Jr.,—and played beautifully, too—make their scenes together unforgettably touching.

The cast is good all up and down the line, however. It includes Gene Lockhart, welcomed back to straight roles, Marjorie Marquis, Eda Heine-mann, and a shrewd little youngster's bit by Walter Vonnegut, Jr. And out of Robert Edmond Jones's memory book of the wallpaper and cherry-mahogany of his youth come some of his most authentic settings.

It is a comfort and a treat, this *Ah, Wilderness!* I for one found it paradise enow.

***Ah, Wilderness!****Eugene Burr*

It can almost be reported that Eugene O'Neill has abandoned the Drayma after his long struggle with it and given us once more a play—almost, that is, but not quite. To be precise, Mr. O'Neill has given us two-thirds of one act of a play (something more than the Volstead percentage), but even that is cause enough for cheering when compared with the batting averages of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Strange Interlude*, *The Great God Brown* and other boob-ticklers of the Freud-and-folderol school.

The occasion is, of course, the opening of *Ah, Wilderness!*, presented by the Theater Guild in its home playhouse, with George M. Cohan featured in the cast—incidentally, the first time, I believe, that anyone has ever been featured in Guild billing. Mr. O'Neill himself describes his play as "a folk comedy." That would be a good description of it if it were a comedy—but, unfortunately, it isn't. O'Neill has never been remarkable for his sense of humor, humor was, in fact, one attribute that even his most rabid and unseeing worshipers could never claim for him. Even in the fine early plays those interludes that attempted comedy relief were pretty sad affairs. In the later attempts they were even sadder. A sense of humor is one of the two things that Mr. O'Neill most conspicuously lacks.

The other—and this holds true only of late years when he began to take himself seriously (capital "S" please)—is his disconcerting and complete lack of even the rudiments of dramatic technique. He has improved immensely in the present play over his immediately previous efforts—he has, in fact, almost reached the ability that he displayed when he first began writing—but the defect is still there. He spins out interminably situations that should have been touched on, he is painfully explicit concerning items that he should merely suggest; his motivation of mere stage mechanics—getting people on and off and the rest—is amazingly awkward. But then, it must be hard to get out of the marathon habits of *Interlude* and *Electra*, it is too much to expect that Mr. O'Neill could climb back to competence in one try.

Mainly it is the fault of the pitiful attempts at comedy, some of which, like the trite and obvious dinner-table-drunk scene, are merely cheap, and some of which, like the tasteless and horrible attempt to draw humor out of a sensitive lad getting drunk in a brothel, are frankly nauseating. It was the humor—eminently unsuccessful tries at it—that made the first two acts of *Ah, Wilderness!* and the first scene of the third act seem overlong, pointless, uninspired and deadeningly, unendurably dull. There are obvious situations in *Ah, Wilderness!*—plenty of them, there are hokey effects and trite melodramatics that would cause the critical gentry to land with both feet if the play had been written by anyone else. But the last two scenes are sensitively and beautifully done. They hold out a glowing promise for those determined

lovers of the old O'Neill who steadfastly held to their admiration no matter how hard, in the later plays, O'Neill himself tried to discourage them.

And even (this is a note of pure gloom) in one of those two last scenes there is a long and useless soliloquy, adding nothing, meaning nothing that has not been said before, badly written and overwritten—as is so much of the play before it

Yet, without the pitifully attempted humor, without the unconscionable padding, without the overwriting and bad taste, *Ah, Wilderness!* might have stood as a delicate and sensitive (tho rather obvious) study of adolescence. In fact, barring the meaningless soliloquy, the last two scenes stand as such now

The story is a simple tale of the Miller family back in 1906 New England, and chiefly of Nat, the father, and Richard, the son who is going to Yale the following year. Also included are Mother Essie, Arthur, who is in Yale already, Mildred, just beyond the awkward /16/ age, little Tommy, Aunt Lily, a prim old maid, and Uncle Sid Davis, mother's brother, who has wanted to marry Aunt Lily for 15 years, but who still insists on getting drunk.

(The play treats of young Richard as his eyes first open to the meaning—the meaninglessness, rather—of life. He is a serious lad, filled with the verboten writings of Oscar Wilde and that notorious lecher, Mr Swinburne, with a smattering of Shaw, Ibsen and Omar Khayyam on the side. He is in love with Muriel McComber, whose father is 1906 New England personified, and it is in the treatment of this love that O'Neill reaches his finest understanding. It is adolescent love—calf-love, if you will—but O'Neill realizes the deep truth that it is as real and terrible, as fraught with meaning and portent, to young Richard as the most publicized emotions would be to a 40-year-old man-of-the-world. Essentially there is nothing comic about Richard and his love—and essentially O'Neill realizes it. That is why the surface attempts at comedy are so tasteless, flat and stale.

When Mr McComber finds that Richard has written excerpts from Swinburne to his daughter he makes Muriel write a note renouncing love. So Richard sneaks off on a spree and is treated thereafter by his family with more understanding than any family has a logical right to show. In the end he meets Muriel on the beach, and there follows one of the loveliest of the theater's love scenes,) made so in great measure by the sensitive, delicate and entirely fine performances of Elisha Cook Jr and Ruth Gilbert, who play the roles. Dicky is a fine lad at heart, and his father knows it. His abortive attempt to sow wild oats has taught him only that the crops therefrom yield no profit. Father Nat tries to tell him the facts of a certain part of life in a bungled, embarrassed, heart-moving way, and in the end young Richard goes out on the porch to sit in the moonlight, while his father and mother, arm in arm, climb upstairs to bed.

Those last two scenes are sensitive and beautiful and tremendously effective, they are the first thing that we have had to remind us of the earlier and finer O'Neill

George M. Cohan is, of course, the father—and he heroically bolsters Mr. O'Neill's play in spots where it sadly needs bolstering. He is, as a matter of report, about the best actor to tread a Guild stage since Richard Bennett died tragically each night in *He Who Gets Slapped*, he could teach the tricks of the trade—the expert playing of comedy, tragedy, meller and everything else—to all those who have gone between. And that includes the Lunts and who else have you. If Walter Hampden ever relinquishes the rights to it, I'd like some day to see Mr. Cohan play Cyrano.

Elisha Cook Jr. gives a sensitive and fine portrayal of young Richard, and Marjorie Marquis is splendid as the mother. Eda Heinemann is effective as always as Aunt Lily, and Gene Lockhart is allowed to overplay pretty badly on occasion as Uncle Sid. Little Ruth Gilbert, whose past includes appearances in musicals, gives a touching and splendid performance in the brief bit she is allotted as Muriel. She and Cook between them—with O'Neill, of course—create a haunting loveliness that stamps the beach scene deep in the emotions and mind.

Those last two scenes in a great measure make up for the rest of the play—but, obviously, not entirely. They do, however, indicate that Mr. O'Neill may eventually succeed in getting back to where he was in the beginning. *Ah, Wilderness!* is a definitely promising play. /17/

### ***Days Without End***

*John Mason Brown*

The Theatre Guild did what it could to make Eugene O'Neill's "Days Without End" seem acceptable theatre fare at Henry Miller's last night. Mr. Moeller has directed it skillfully. Mr. Simonson has set it nicely in a series of partially indicated interiors. And Mr. [Earle] Larimore and Mr. [Stanley] Ridges act the Soul-Dust Twins who represent the warring natures of its unhappy hero with much technical skill and precision. But the sorry fact remains that, in spite of the Guild's first-aid treatment and the script's obvious sincerity of purpose, this latest drama of Mr. O'Neill's must take its place along with "Dynamo" and "Welded" among the feeblest of his works.

It is as heavy-handed and pretentious as only its author can be in his less fortunate efforts. Indeed so static is most of its tricky writing and so trite is the conclusion toward which it labors that one hates to think what a first-night audience would have done to it if the program had not carried Mr. O'Neill's name.

Once again the first playwright in our theatre has undertaken to illustrate in terms of the drama the all-too-simple fact that each person contains many persons within himself. As he used masks to prove his point in "The Great God Brown," so in "Days Without End" he has Mr. Larimore shadowed by

an *alter ego* (Mr. Ridges) who gives utterance to his darkest thoughts and the doubts which torment his life. And just as he employed soliloquies and asides in "Strange Interlude" to tap the stream of consciousness and contrast the inner and outer aspects of his people, so Mr. O'Neill now has Mr. Ridges on hand, standing in the corner, hiding behind chairs, and playing "Going to Jerusalem" in order to broadcast the misgivings which are supposed to lurk in a sulphurous corner of Mr. Larimore's mind.

The tortured hero of "Days Without End" is, in other words, a Faust who is his own Mephistopheles. He has been a devout Catholic, lost his faith in his boyhood when his parents died, turned Socialist, Communist and atheist by turns, married a woman who has been unhappily married before but who believes completely in him, and found absolute happiness in his love for her. But the black devil that is in him has made him dread what will happen to his new-found serenity if death ever robs him of his wife. It has made him afraid of a love that is almost a religion. And it has led him into a single physical transgression, which, while it has meant nothing to him, comes near to breaking up his home, killing his wife, and blighting his life.

His uncle, a Catholic priest, arrives in New York and looks him up. To his wife, who has had influenza, and to this priest, Mr. O'Neill's hero (attended by his other self) outlines the novel he is writing which he has based upon his own life, his boyhood doubts, his marriage, and his meaningless infidelity. His wife recognizes herself as the betrayed woman in the story, walks out into the night in the hope of catching pneumonia as the heroine of the novel has done, succeeds in catching it in a remarkably short time, and almost dies.

Meanwhile her husband has been struggling so hard with the demon who trails him that he ultimately manages to get rid of him under a crucifix in a church. Doubter though he may have been, he ends up by being a believer, by admitting the divinity of Christ, by discovering that Christ is love, and by realizing that death is now dead.

According to Mr. O'Neill "Days Without End" is a "modern miracle play," but the description hardly seems accurate. For almost everything that was simple, straightforward, and disarmingly poignant in the miracle plays of old becomes tedious, ridiculously elaborate, turgid and artificial in this fakey preachment of our own times.

Even as a stunt play Mr. O'Neill's "Days Without End" leaves much to be desired. It is written in cumbersome sentences that soon begin to settle like a heavy fog in the auditorium. It has no real eloquence even in its final moments of affirmation when the need for such eloquence is painful. Its device is as obvious as it is tiresome. And, except for the short second act scene between the wife and the woman with whom her husband has stayed, the play's emotional conflict never proves contagious. All of its parts, save that of the unconscionable egotist who is its central figure, are drab "feeders" who have little or nothing to do. Like Mr. O'Neill's split infinitive of a hero, these lesser characters find themselves fighting the battle between doubt and faith in a tawdry ineffective melodrama that tells an old, old story.

and that reaches the not very original conclusion that faith is good and that God is love

Miss Royle is lovely to look at but rather wooden and extremely self-righteous as the noble wife, Miss Chase contributes an excellent bit as the cynic who has tempted Mr O'Neill's hero in order to get her revenge on her own faithless husband, and Mr Loraine not only plays the thankless part of the priest nicely but has acquired an Irish accent for the occasion which he has few real chances to use

Mr. Larimore and Mr Ridges, as has been noted, divide the actors' honors between them as the two warring natures of the hero Their assignment is not any easy one, but they meet it with considerable ingenuity and skill. Just why Mr. Ridges should be made up to look quite as odd as he does is a question that is difficult to answer One irreverent member of the audience confided to me that he mistook him for Dave Chasen I only wish he had been Dave Chasen would have helped matters a lot Yes, and so would Joe Cook.

#### GENERAL CRITICISM

##### **"Eugene O'Neill, Poet and Mystic"**

*Arthur Hobson Quinn*

It is perhaps inevitable that when an original creative artist arises, a myth should speedily develop concerning him. It is even more inevitable when, as in the case of Eugene O'Neill, his influence extends beyond the limits of his own country and he becomes an international figure When a playwright's work is produced in New York and Tokio, in Copenhagen and Bombay, in Prague and in Manila, mistaken judgments naturally arise, caused in some cases by inability of the foreign producer to understand the meaning of the play. Perhaps the director of the Berlin production of "Anna Christie" may be pardoned some day for making Anna shoot herself. Gémier, who produced "The Emperor Jones" at the Odéon in Paris, cheerfully sent a number of negroes across the stage between the scenes, to represent the chase after the Emperor. He was apparently unaware that one of the tragic elements in that play comes from the fact that the rhythmic "tom-tom" lures the Emperor back to the very spot at which he enters the forest, while the negroes simply wait for him to come.

It is perhaps unfair to expect foreign productions of an American dramatist to rival those in his own country, but surely his native land also has much to answer for, in the growth of that "O'Neill myth" which obscures the real significance of his work.<sup>1</sup> This myth is one result of the utter confusion of our standards of dramatic criticism, which speak of him one day as a "sordid Realist," a "grim primitive Naturalist" the next, a "lying Moral Romanticist" a little later, and an "immoral violent Expressionist" in the

<sup>1</sup>"Eugene O'Neill, Poet and Mystic," *Scribner's Magazine* (October 1926), 368-372

following chapter, and so on without apparently considering the possibility of his varying at times in his methods and without thoroughly understanding the basic meaning of his art

A writer is not always the best exponent of his own artistic purpose, but in a letter recently sent to me, O'Neill puts the matter so forcibly that, with his permission, I am quoting a portion of it

"But where I feel myself most neglected is just where I set most store by myself—as a bit of a poet who has labored with the spoken word to evolve original rhythms of beauty where beauty apparently isn't—'Jones,' 'Ape,' 'God's Chillun,' 'Desire,' etc—and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic, too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of character I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind—(Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery, certainly)—and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible—or can be—to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where the theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!"

If Eugene O'Neill is primarily a poet, he is a playwright, too, but he is a great dramatist because he is more than a dramatist His own most distinct successes in the theatre, like "Anna Chris- /368/ tie," interest him least, and, while the theatre is in his blood, he will be finally estimated not by his stage devices, like the four-roomed cottage in "Desire Under the Elms," but by his profound imaginative interpretation of aspiring humanity, struggling upward, even through sin and shame, toward the light

O'Neill's art is progressive, within itself and as part of our dramatic history To those who view our national art through diminishing-glasses he seems a radical departure from all before him. But to one who views it in its steady development he was to be expected Essentially, drama is a celebration of the individual in conflict with something—Fate, circumstance, moral, and social law—which hampers or crushes him. In the early nineteenth century, the authors of "The Gladiator" or "Metamora" celebrated the hero who rebelled against political tyranny. In the later part of the century the conflict became more frequently economic, though American playwrights did not use this theme as often as their European rivals. With the twentieth century, political and economic rights having been secured, the dramatists, under the leadership of William Vaughn Moody, became concerned with the problem of the individual's right to self-expression, and the sanctity of rebellion was taught, even, as in "The Masque of Judgment," to the overthrow of



God himself Many significant plays, like "The Piper," "Kindling," "The Inheritors," or "A Man's World," are founded on a situation in which the hero or heroine is brought into conflict with the selfishness, the indifference, or the stratification of the life around him This motive may well continue, although the success of "Expressing Willie," Miss Crothers's brilliant satire upon the artificial pose which exploits the demand for self-expression as a social asset, indicates perhaps a sense of its passing.

[ Eugene O'Neill certainly marks the next step forward The individual no longer rebels against God or Fate for the right to express himself He demands something more. The Creative Force, as part of its responsibility for the creation of the individual, must express him. O'Neill himself indicates the essential dignity of his art. Whatever his characters may attempt, success or failure means little, but the struggle was worth while Misguided, blundering, The Hairy Ape was struggling for his place in creation, and the final words of the play, "the Hairy Ape perhaps at last belongs" are clear ] Ephraim Cabot in "Desire" talks to God as a task-master in whose very "hardness" he rejoices The New Englander of Cabot's type gloried in an adversary worthy of his steel, and those residents of that section who disclaim the characters in "Desire" are respectfully referred to a tombstone in a Massachusetts graveyard on which is inscribed

"Here lie I, Jacob Elginbrod,  
Have mercy on my soul, O God,  
As I would on yours, if I were God  
And you were Jacob Elginbrod "

But the representation of the Force of life is not always so concrete as in "Desire." In "The Great God Brown," it manifests itself in at least four of the main characters Dion Anthony, the painter, who represents the creative spirit of art; William Brown, the successful man of to-day, Margaret, the normal woman; Cybel, the prostitute—all representing the eternal creative instinct in different phases The struggle here is expressed symbolically, and the interpretation of the varying changes of personality in the characters is, on the stage, made quicker of appeal through the use of masks After all, the test of drama is the stage production, and that the audience receives a dramatic impression is apparent. For O'Neill with all his symbolism never fails to create live people, and probably three-fourths of the audience of "The Great God Brown" are held by the human struggle without seeing the symbolism at all. They see the tragedy in the dying words of Dion and of Brown, both begging for the belief which the paganism of one and the materialism of the other had crushed out of their lives. And this is really all O'Neill expects them to see. He is not proposing any solution of this eternal problem, as he proposed no solution in "Anna Christie" or "The Hairy Ape " Back of the human lives he treats he sees a force so infinitely greater than any character that man cannot estimate it, but can only feel, dimly or ecstatically, the power he can but vaguely interpret There it is—"the glory and the dream."

For O'Neill is a mystic. Generations of Celtic ancestry flower in him, just as generations of the Puritan mystic flowered in Hawthorne and Emerson. In him the Celtic nature, with its intimate relations with the past, catches a gleam now and then of the dim regions where God brought into being a nobler form of life than had before existed. Because of this clutch of the primitive which the Celt as the oldest of the Indo-European races has guarded as its birthright, O'Neill goes down into the depths of human life to study apparently degraded forms. His audiences gasp often, comprehend sometimes, but always apprehend at least that a soul is speaking to them who has something important to say. European and Asiatic audiences, even if they often mistake his meaning, recognize, too, in some instances better than his own countrymen, the universal note in his work. It is this lack of the parochial that has carried his plays into critical favor on the Continent, and it is to the credit of the European at least that so little attempt has been made to "derive" him from Scandinavian sources. For, while O'Neill is acquainted with drama that has preceded him, the mysticism of the Celt is not the mysticism of the Teuton. With the exception of "Different" [*sic*] indeed, his plays all have a lift, an exaltation, which is the touchstone of true tragedy. The drama of pessimism is not his province, for the Celt hears, even with the fingers of fate at his throat, a cry in his ears which has too many vibrations per second for the other races to hear. One has only to see the last act of "The Straw" to realize how O'Neill can dramatize the insistent hold of hope in the human breast even in the face of death.

It is this Celtic ancestry which leads him to symbolism. The race, in its painting, its poetry, its religion, thinks in symbols, knowing that mysticism has to be tied down to reality by some concrete expression. The procession on Fifth Avenue in "The Hairy Ape" bothered a great many. It appeared to them out of the picture of realistic life on which the rest of the play seemed to be based. To O'Neill it was only an experiment, differing not in kind, but in degree, for the entire play was a symbolic picture of the struggle upward of physical strength toward a spiritual growth.

One of the most interesting characteristics of O'Neill's work lies in his refusal to be neatly classified. "Beyond the Horizon," his first long play to be produced, and "The Great God Brown," this year, seem at first to be of a vastly different species. Of course, like any true artist, he moves on. His first plays were written in the accepted mode. But what makes "Beyond the Horizon" still the best of his naturalistic plays is not its form, but its flavor of romance. In that it is akin to everything he has done. In that first play he put his own longings for adventure, which led him to South Africa and South America, which took him into the hold of a steamer and the life "on the beach." When Robert Mayo says, "Supposing I was to tell you that it's just Beauty that's calling me, the beauty of the far off and unknown," it is O'Neill himself that is speaking.

He steadily declines to be limited in his theme or locality. His roots are in America, often in the New England where he has lived so long and which he understands so well, from its farms to its police courts, which as a reporter

he had to frequent. He can describe the decadent aristocracy of the small town in New England as in "The First Man" as realistically as Mary Wilkins Freeman or Alice Brown, but he is really not concerned with their limitations except as background. In "The Fountain" the elixir of eternal youth attracts him as a romantic theme, just as it attracted Hawthorne in "Doctor Grimshawe's Secret," and in his last written play, "Marco Millions," there still remains to be produced another romance, this time satiric, with an Old World wanderer for its hero.)

It is not only in his choice of such a theme as the water of eternal life that he resembles Hawthorne. In that striking passage in Emerson's Journals in which he describes Hawthorne's burial, the Concord philosopher tells us

"Clarke in the church said that Hawthorne had done more justice than any /370/ other to the shades of life, shown a sympathy with the crime in our nature and, like Jesus, was the friend of sinners."

Discussion raged at one time over the problem of the apparent contradiction between Hawthorne's retired life at Salem, Lenox, or Concord and his deep knowledge of the effects of sin and even crime upon the consciences of his characters. No such problem occurs in the case of O'Neill. His wanderings in search of adventure and his experience as a reporter have both brought him into contact with the seamy side of human nature. But the important point does not lie in a discussion of their material. The significant fact remains that twice during our literary history a poet has used the medium of prose to reveal the beauty that lies in the human soul, even though it has gone through the crucible of temptation and sin, to fuse away the dross of life. To Hawthorne, Hester Prynne and Donatello were finer clay than if adultery and murder had not stained them, because through suffering they won a character not theirs before. Anna Christie, purified from her sordid past by the cleansing power of the "old devil sea", Dion Anthony, hiding his longing to create under the mask of the sensualist, are expressions of the same sympathy with sinners. To Hawthorne's serene certainty of form O'Neill has not attained, but of course he is still only thirty-eight, while Hawthorne was forty-six when he wrote "The Scarlet Letter." O'Neill is working in a different medium, and has not even yet learned to avoid certain uglinesses of detail which are most apparent in "Different," *[sic]* "The Hairy Ape," and "Desire Under the Elms."

These defects, however, are the result of misguided power, never of weakness or carelessness. Like Hawthorne again, O'Neill ruthlessly destroys his work if it is not up to his standard. Nineteen of his plays, many of which were in one act, have been sent to oblivion. Here again the romantic stories about his manuscripts being accidentally lost in an old trunk down in Washington Square are a part of the myth that is persistently being built up around him. There were no manuscripts left by him to such a chance, but he deliberately destroyed his less artistic efforts to keep him, as he humorously says, "out of temptation."

For O'Neill takes his art, but not himself, quite seriously. The O'Neill myth amuses him, for the simply sincere personality back of his plays has

nothing of the theatre in his appearance or general outlook. He works in his own way—that is his right. Like any one who does important work, he is intense in his concentration, and while the letter incorporated in this paper is written in a clear and readable script, the manuscript of his plays is characteristic of the absorption of the artist in his work. The script begins in a fairly normal hand, then as it progresses the writing becomes smaller and more crowded, until, as the mood grows more intense, it becomes almost illegible to the normal eye. Like all poets and mystics, he sees before him the supreme goal, the distractions of life and the opinions of men are apparently of not much significance, although O'Neill is not in any real sense a recluse. He lives in his home in Connecticut, a convenient place of escape, for work of the kind he is doing needs the quiet in which concentrated effort alone is possible. (But he assumes none of the airs of the mystic, for the part is not assumed. It is only one of the phases of O'Neill's work which lift him out of the parochial and lead him to the universal atmosphere in which great art flowers.)

One group of our playwrights may go on painting amusing pictures which the comic supplement throws upon the screen of American life. That our audiences should crowd the theatres where such plays are produced is easily understood, and that London should also absorb them with delight and in the spirit of the visitor to a museum is quite explainable. But it is encouraging that when an artist like Eugene O'Neill resolutely sets his face against the picturing of the merely little things of life he should have won the wide recognition he already enjoys. He paints little souls and big souls, but he never consciously gives us the unimportant or the mean. We may not like all of his characters, we may even shudder at them, as we do at the Emperor Jones himself, but O'Neill found in that thief and murderer a spark that distinguished him from all the natives of that imaginary island. We agree with the epitaph of Smithers the half-caste, "'E's a better man than the lot o' you put together."

O'Neill found that spark, of course, because he put it there. (Even in the most degraded man, O'Neill recognizes the saving grace that comes from his divine origin.) Nearly a century ago, Emerson called this universal brotherhood in us the creation of the Oversoul, the Life Force that animates everything, and founded on this conception his gospel of hope. O'Neill has dared to go further into the depths than Emerson or Hawthorne, for the Puritan had reactions of conservatism from which the Celt is free. But it is a pitiful stupidity of criticism that sees only the repellent in "All God's Chillun Got Wings" or "Desire Under the Elms." I confess frankly that on reading the first I could see little beauty in it, but in the theatre I recognized again the vision of the poet who saw more deeply than I. I felt, too, my academic objections to soliloquy on the stage go by the board when I recognized that to these characters soliloquy was natural. But I have become accustomed to seeing theatrical rules broken with success by O'Neill because he practically never breaks dramatic laws. It is a great thing for art when academic definitions are shattered by creative genius, and I hope he will go on shat-

tering them For he has become the concrete expression of the greatest principle in art, that of freedom, freedom to choose one's subject anywhere, to treat it in any manner, provided always that the characters are great figures and the treatment is sincere

It is, fortunately, too soon to pass any final judgment upon O'Neill, but it is high time to arrive at some perspective concerning him For he is, I think, passing through a phase of his development His material has always been romantic, whether it be chosen from the slums of New York or Spain in the fifteenth century ✓ But he began with a treatment which is essentially realistic, and in "Beyond the Horizon" he proved that there is no antithesis between romantic material and realistic treatment, but that the latter corrects and adjusts the imaginative processes of the first. With "The Hairy Ape" he passed into a stage of symbolic treatment which may have reached its height in "The Great God Brown." The danger here lies in the fact that romance and symbolism mix too easily, and the result may be confusion That is why I still prefer "Beyond the Horizon" and "The Emperor Jones" to any of the rest. But, no matter what new phase in his development may come, there will be apparent still the poet, brooding and creating, and the mystic, letting speak through him the Creative Force that lifts humanity from the beast that passes to the man who eternally aspires /372/

### **"The Triumphant Genius of Eugene O'Neill"**

*Benjamin de Casseres*

It is seldom that such honors from that old huzzy, Fame, are bestowed on one man as have come to Eugene O'Neill in this winter of 1928 Almost simultaneously with the world-première of *Lazarus Laughed*, in Frankfort, Germany, (later to be presented in Moscow), the Theatre Guild has staged *Marco Millions* and *Strange Interlude* in New York and his publishers present "Strange Interlude" to the reading world fast on the heels of the publication of "Lazarus Laughed" and "Marco Millions "

Genius has its innings at last in its lifetime; and American genius at that! An American playwright—a revolutionist in form, a scathing ironist and a poetic pessimist in substance—is crowned in an era of brutal, materialistic babbitttry!

A world-figure that has never compromised, O'Neill has literally slugged his way, both personally and artistically, out of obscurity to Success It is the greatest triumph of Faith and Guts over Box-Office that I know.

Bleat and whinny as you will, you poor bloodless, objective, sedate critical chemists who spend your days picking fly-specks out of black pepper! I throw up my hat! I know a heroic figure when I see one. I howl, I dance, I prance with glee at O'Neill's triple triumph.

I am not Anglo-Saxon, and I spill my feelings all over the sidewalks of

New York Salutations, O'Neill! From *Bound East from Cardiff* to *Strange Interlude* has been a *Via Dolorosa*. At each station on the way he has uttered his Dionysian defi in the shape of a play, and at the end there bursts upon him not a cross but the Pantheon of Creative Genius, where he enters to the fanfare of the ironic demons and angels

Success magazines, with your eternal blah and bull about your Schwabs, your Fords and Garys, take notice Sometimes Faith and Guts succeed, too, in the world of Art But God forfend that ever Eugene O'Neill should get into your pages

Ah! there are Monte Cristos in our realm, too! What James O'Neill, Eugene's father, played for thirty years was an allegory and a prophecy concerning his son "The world is mine!"

The Swiftian satire of *The Great God Brown* and the exquisitely mournful beauty of *The Fountain* heralded the coming of *Marco Millions* O'Neill has taken Marco Polo, the venetian traveler to Cathay, and re-created him in the image of the eternal Rotarian

Structurally, the fundamental idea of *Marco Millions* is the conflict between the practical world and the intellectual-aesthetic world, between money-bags, typified in Marco, and Wisdom and Beauty, incarnated in those creations of rare and pallid beauty, Kublai, the Great Khan. Princess Kuka-chin, his granddaughter, and Chu-Yin, a Cathayan sage

O'Neill dipped his pen in vitriol and rainbow to write *Marco* It reveals O'Neill to be a superb poet and an epigrammatist who cuts to the roots of world-wisdom and world-weariness It is great literature, this play (at this writing I have not seen it acted), as are also *The Fountain* and *The Great God Brown* They show us O'Neill turning from stark realism to the higher fields of the imagination without for a moment loosening his foothold in the muds of reality It was a brilliant idea to pit the wisdom of the Chamber of Commerce against the wisdom of the Poet and Nirvanist It is enkernelled in the lines of Kublai Kaan /12/

"My hideous suspicion is that God is only an infinite, insane energy which creates and destroys without other purpose than to pass eternity in avoiding thought Then the stupid man becomes the Perfect Incarnation of Omnipotence and the Polos are the true children of God "

From *Marco Millions* to *Lazarus Laughed* is a flight from the beatitudes of irony to the irony of beatitudes, from Man to After-Man, from a fable of earth to a fable of Revelation, at once sublime and diabolical In sheer power, daring and allegorical implications I rank the latter with the *Faust* of Goethe, *The Temptation of St Anthony* of Flaubert and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*.

As everything O'Neill has done has been spun out of his own innards, out of his own hells and heavens—which puts the stamp of authenticity on all he has done—Lazarus is not only O'Neill himself but an incarnation from the dimensions of the "unarithmetical smile" of Æschylus.

Lazarus having been raised from the dead brings to the world a message from beyond the grave. It is: God is laughter, and that immortality—not personal but cosmic—is attained by those who, like Zarathustra and Faust,

utter a Dionysian "Yes" before the spectacles of good and evil in all incarnations

It is Hellenism battering down Buddhism, or at least fusing with it, for in the great spiritual dimension of Lazarus's laughter Yea and Nay are one

"There is only one life," says Lazarus "I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart: 'There is Eternal Life in No,' it said, 'and there is the same Eternal Life in Yes! Death is the fear between!'" And my heart reborn to love of life cried, 'Yes!' and I laughed in the laughter of God!"

But Tiberius knows the danger of inciting the human race to universal and continuous laughter, so he burns Lazarus, who laughs his way into—life again? Lazarus himself knows that men are not prepared to receive his Revelation of the scornful Yes and the Diabolical Laugh and some of his speeches are terrible castigations

But I have told you nothing of what takes place in the four acts of this protagonistic drama—of Caligula, of Miriam, the wife of Lazarus, exquisitely conceived as dumb, adoring love, of the massed masked choruses typifying the seven periods of life It must be read, it must be seen In it O'Neill, who has himself come out of Hell and Death, affirms Life with a titanic Yes!

Having mastered all drama forms, O'Neill after *Lazarus* and *Marco* turned to a conception of putting the "stream of consciousness" into a long play It had been adumbrated in the old "asides" and "soliloquies" It came into literary being with the "Ulysses" of Joyce It had been tried sporadically by Elmer Rice and Don Marquis

O'Neill has done it in nine acts in *Strange Interlude*, a play which if it is a success I predict will revolutionize the stage of the world If it is not (and as I write this it has not yet been produced), it will still remain a great novel in play form, a unique literary achievement, a startling and profound psychological document.

It is the life story of Nina Leeds and the men she dominates, plays with and makes fools of It is one of the most complete portraits of a modern woman's soul in literature

Nina is woman, matriarch, sweetheart, Jezebel, cannibal. She is the central sun Sex around which swing male stars of the first magnitude and of no magnitude. Charles Marsden, *Boobus Eternitatus*, sticks to the end, and in the sere and yellow of her latter years gains her, while Nina falls asleep wearily, *sans* illusion, *sans* passion.

The great originality of *Strange Interlude* lies in the double speeches of all the characters—what their lying lips say and what their brains are really whispering to themselves The cynical wisdom of life, the unveiling of the Isis of the face and the exposure of the murderous egotism of all of us that lies beyond has never been done so dramatically and inexorably as O'Neill has done it in *Strange Interlude*. Again I must say, see or read this play It cannot be described It is clutching, overturning, palpitating with life—hot, scalding thought and action

For one man to have written this trilogy of plays in two years is an amazing feat. The genius of O'Neill evolves naturally, rhythmically and

masterfully like a colossal symphony There is nothing he will not do, nothing he cannot now do in the realm of the theatre

With Robinson Jeffers, Eugene O'Neill has brought Tragic Terror and Tragic Beauty back to the literature and stage of the English-speaking world /62/

### "The Case of O'Neill"

George Jean Nathan

It is a characteristic mark of the lesser level of American criticism to boost potential and still struggling talent with all the gusto at its command and then, once that talent has come into its own and is sitting pretty on top of the fence, to give it a series of kicks *à l'improviste* in the abstracted rear Nor is the upper level of our criticism entirely free from the same antic What is at the bottom of it is unquestionably the very human, if proportionately uncritical, impulse to help the weak and hoot the strong, to do all we can for those who need us and to dislike, out of the fonts of vanity, those who are perfectly able to take care of themselves and who no longer have any practical use for us. Since the average critic amongst us is hard put to it to submerge his *alter ego* in his judgments and appraisals, since he is unable to dissociate his mind and emotions, we are constantly entertained by the monkeyshine to which I have alluded When a young man of promise appears on the American scene the critics invariably start out like von Suppe's "Light Cavalry" But no sooner is the young man's promise actually realized than they take on the tone of Bizet's "Ivan the Terrible"

Eugene O'Neill is surely not the only writer in our midst who has met with this species of criticism In the beginning, his plays, full of promise but as yet immature, were greeted with a comprehensive and gala pounding upon drums, cymbals and neighborhood dishpans The racket of endorsement was deafening, and out of all proportion to the subject of celebration But when gradually his plays began to attain to genuine solidity, imagination and profundity, when gradually he began to settle himself squarely and securely at the very head of American dramatists, when finally he began to achieve the imprimatur of high critical praise from Europe—when this happened, the hitherto ecstatic local critical jazz and tzigane dancing stopped and in their stead the critical air became filled with Cherubini requiems, Liszt concertos pathétiques, Dvořák *opera* 89 and a whole chorus of Amnerises lifting up a despairful "Ohimè, morir mi sento" The same phenomenon has been observable in the cases of Sinclair Lewis and Cabell, as it was observable some years back in the cases of Dreiser and Victor Herbert At the core of the nonsense, in addition to the point I have already mentioned, is doubtless the familiar critical passion to woo esteem for its independent and flexible judgment, which latter the school of criticism in question generally seeks to demonstrate by a sudden, surprising and intrinsically imbecile



*volte face*, preceded by a certain amount of coquettish controversial detouring and by facetious animadversions on the gluey quality of such more sober critics as prefer to keep themselves in the background by repeating honest, if repetitious and hence dull, estimates of the artist under discussion instead of trying to clown themselves into notoriety and the limelight

O'Neill, as I have said, is presently undergoing his dose of the become stereotyped rigmarole. It began to get under way when he wrote "The Great God Brown", it got up more steam when he wrote "Marco Millions", and it has now spread itself with a pervasive choo-choo tooting upon the appearance of his "Strange Interlude." It is not necessary to believe that these plays constitute the finest work that he has thus far done to appreciate the absurdity of his critical leg-pinchers. It is /500/ only necessary to grant that whatever one may happen to think of them, they are at least reputable efforts and surely, by any standard of criticism, superior to half the plays he produced in the days when all the boys and girls who are now disparaging him let themselves go full blast over his merits. One need not like "The Great God Brown," but no one in his right senses can fail to agree that, at its worst, it is yet a better piece of work than "The Straw." One need not think much of "Marco Millions" to allow that it is nevertheless a better job than "Welded" or "All God's Chillun." And one may actually be convinced that "Strange Interlude" is not all that some of us think it is without believing that "Gold" or "Diff'rent" or "The First Man" or "The Fountain" is infinitely better. Yet the goose-cries shake the welkin. Arbitrarily, evidently under the impression that they have been praising O'Neill long enough, the boys and girls forget the exact quality of his plays that they hymned in the past and proceed to a loud and hollow lambasting, seeking thus to achieve their silly little day in court and to show the world what great Bismarcks they are.

What they are, I allow myself to believe, are pathetic jackasses. O'Neill certainly is susceptible of sound critical attack on a number of sides—if such attack constitutes one a jackass, then I fear that I have on occasion been a lovely one myself—but he just as certainly is not the target for the kind of squashes that are currently being projected at him. Granting that I believe his most recent work is by long odds the soundest and best that he has so far done, and duly allowing that I may be quite wrong in my opinion, it still seems to me that any critic who, having accepted his "Ile," "In the Zone," "Before Breakfast," "The Dreamy Kid," "The Long Voyage Home," "Bound East for Cardiff," "Where the Cross Is Made," "The Rope" and even his "Anna Christie" as admirable, can yet not find his "The Great God Brown," "Marco Millions" and "Strange Interlude" at the very least equally meritorious—that such a critic is sadly in need of a balance wheel.

Of "Marco Millions" and "Strange Interlude" I have already expressed a personal opinion in these pages, and at a time in advance of their actual stage presentation. Of the former, there is little left for me to say. Of the latter, there may be a word or two. The chief objection of the criticsasters to it appears to be the author's employment of soliloquies and asides to suggest

his characters' unspoken thoughts ~~these~~ are declared to be unnecessary, interruptive of the action, superfluous, repetitive and posturing." The play, already extremely long, would, it is asserted, be the more compact and better without them. Exactly the same criticism, obviously, might be made—indeed frequently has been made by the same stripe of dolts—of Schubert's C major symphony, a perfect thing, as every musician knows, despite its similar musical asides, repetitions, interruptions and alleged superfluities. As a piece of musical writing it is relatively as long as O'Neill's play and the same arguments may be used by fools against it, but it remains none the less—to pop a platitude—a consummately beautiful work. And if it is seldom, if ever, played in its entirety, let the critics who imagine that in that fact they have found a good argument be made aware of the equally pertinent fact that "Strange Interlude" as it is currently being played on the Theatre Guild's stage is also not being played in its entirety, but has been very liberally cut down.

To turn to drama, what is argued against O'Neill's asides and soliloquies may just as logically be argued against Shakespeare's. If O'Neill's might be cut out as largely superfluous and interruptive of his play's action, so might Shakespeare's. Most of the soliloquies written by the latter were simply put into his plays to please actors and the plays would move more dramatically without them. If you doubt it, read almost any one of them, even "Hamlet," with the soliloquies and asides deleted. <sup>7501</sup> To contend that Shakespeare's soliloquies constitute great poetry and that O'Neill's do not is to sidestep the direct issue. That issue is simply whether O'Neill's soliloquies and asides are dramaturgically valid. Poetry or lack of poetry has nothing to do with the case. In any event, the argument is based by the critical Bottoms, as so often happens, merely upon labels. The truth about soliloquies and asides as O'Neill employs them is that, while they are cunningly announced by O'Neill to represent the characters' unspoken thoughts—he is a shrewd hand at concealing the obvious and artfully masking it in a way to make the impressionables gabble—they are actually nothing more than straight dramatic speeches, as anyone can readily determine by referring, for example, to the powerful dramatic scene, say, at the conclusion of his sixth act. O'Neill has simply written his characters' thoughts in terms of straight dramatic speeches and has passed the device off on the idiotic novelty lovers by craftily insisting that they are only mute meditations.

As to the yawns over the play's considerable length—it runs for something like five hours—we engage criticism based upon the sensitiveness of the yawpers' sterns rather than upon the work of art itself. A certain critic finds that his netherland becomes weary after sitting out the play and hence confounds his netherland with his cerebrum which, in his case, is largely indistinguishable from it. Art is thus estimated not in terms of mental pleasure but of physical discomfort. The old Babbitt plaint that the Louvre is altogether too large for enjoyment and that the bath-rooms at Bayreuth are awful. While it is not to be denied that a five-hour play imposes more of a strain upon one than a two and one-half hour play, the strain surely is no

reflection upon the play's quality. A Chinese drama that runs for three nights is not *ipso facto* worse than a play by Mr. Harry Delf that runs for a couple of hours. The Oberammergau Passion Play, that runs on and on, may still conceivably be better than one of the Rev. Dr. Charles Rann Kennedy's shorter Biblical exhibits. Shaw's two-night "Back to Methuselah" doesn't impress me as being great shakes, but the fact remains that when it was cut down to one night's playing time it was made twice as senseless and dull as it would otherwise have been.

The kind of criticism that is ladled out to our more mature artists must often reduce them to a disgusted laughter. Lewis, when he writes an "Elmer Gantry," is met with the objection that—I quote literally from no less than thirty reviewers—"the book contains scarcely a decent character, almost all of them are hypocrites, scoundrels and vile." The same criticism may be made of Gorki's admitted masterpiece, "Nachtsyl." Dreiser, when he writes a novel twice as long as one of, say, Christopher Morley's, is charged with the very *embonpoint* and dispensation for which Dostoevski is acclaimed. Cabell is disparaged for doing what the Restoration writers are commended for. Sherwood Anderson is criticized for faults that in Zola are held to be virtues. And O'Neill is made mock of, in his finest and greatest play, for daring a profound and beautiful thing, far removed from the routine swamps of Broadway, instead of safely hugging the critical coasts with more of his youthful confections wherein a supposed spy's secret documents turn out to be love letters, wherein a Swede is given knock-out drops in a gin-mill, and wherein everybody goes crazy in a green light looking for gold or ile /502/

### **"Eugene O'Neill and the Highbrow Melodrama"**

*H. G. Kemelman*

Melodrama, as the name implies, is a combination of music and drama. This combination, once a popular form of dramatic art, has now almost entirely disappeared as a form of expression. In recent years the drama-music combination has been confined largely to the silent cinema. Here, as in stage melodramas of an earlier period, the music that accompanied the action was an integral part of the dramatic presentation. The music helped to build up the emotional background that made the action plausible. When the play was examined apart from the music, it was found to be unbalanced and unreal, the characters lifeless, their speech extravagant and grandiose. The characters were invariably type or "stock" characters whose physical features foreshadowed their actions in the play. Thus, the villain was tall and sleek and invariably had a small, dark moustache. It was not necessary that he do anything villainous, his moustache was sufficient proof of his villainy and the audience interpreted his actions accordingly. Because the accompanying music carried part of the emotional burden, the writer of

melodramas was able to evoke a greater emotional response from his audience than was possible in tragedy. Violence, unrestrained action and speech, and a romantic, daydream picture of life characterized the melodrama.

So pronounced were the violence and exaggeration of the melodrama in its original form that they came to be regarded as its fundamental characteristics, and the term melodrama was applied to all serious plays with exaggerated action whether they were accompanied by music or not. The introduction of the vitaphone resulted in the passing of the silent cinema, which was the last stronghold of the drama-music type of melodrama. By the term melodrama as used in this essay will be understood the present meaning of exaggerated and unbalanced serious drama.

The popularity of the melodrama is due in great part to its romanticism. It presents in concrete form that vague, improbable, yet delightful daydream world which exists only in the unrestrained fancy of the individual. The shop-girl sees her daydream self depicted in the beautiful movie actress who overcomes all obstacles and succeeds in winning the handsome hero. The department store clerk who in idle moments imagines himself a hard-riding cowboy, foiling the cattle thieves and marrying the beautiful New York heiress who happens to be visiting the ranch, finds in the melodrama a more complete expression of his idle fancies, and for the hour or so that the performance lasts it is himself who is living the part and not the actor on the stage. He never questions the probability of the action; the more exaggerated it is, the more villains he overcomes /482/ singlehanded, the better he likes it. Of course, sometimes the hero is a gold-miner or a wealthy clubman or a lieutenant of Cossacks, but basically he is always the same, since the daydream self of the individual in the audience is always the same. Like a tailor's dummy, he is tricked out in different costumes, but it is always the same wax figure underneath. Naturally, the mentality of the audience will determine the character of the melodrama. The melodrama of the cinema is concerned with the romanticism of action, since physical prowess is for the movie fan the criterion of greatness. But there is another type of melodrama, a type which appeals to a more intellectual but no less romantic audience. This type, which we might call "highbrow melodrama", embodies intellectual and emotional romanticism. Highbrow melodrama is just as exaggerated and unreal as the melodrama of the movies, but the unreality is along different lines. And in this category ofighbrow melodramas belong the plays of Eugene O'Neill.

## II

In O'Neill we find no blond, curly-headed heroes foiling train robbers and no sleek, dark villains kidnapping heroines, but we do find two male types just as distinct and just as unreal as these. The male protagonist, or rather that male character who has the sympathy of the author, is the same in every play. He is always a sensitive soul with large, dark eyes and a face harrowed by lines of internal struggle. The other male type, the antagonist, although not always clearly defined since O'Neill's heroes do not always

fight against individuals, is usually a thick-set, practical man with small, blue eyes. In the movie melodrama, virtue in the male was a matter of hirsutage on the upper lip, in the O'Neill highbrow melodramas, virtue depends on eye pigmentation. Let us examine the evidence.

In *The Great God Brown* the opposition between the two types is clearly stated. William Brown is first introduced to us as "a handsome, tall, and athletic boy of nearly eighteen. He is blond and blue-eyed, with a likeable smile and a frank good-humoured face, its expression already indicating a disciplined restraint. His manner has the easy self-assurance of a normal intelligence." The reader new to O'Neill is apt to jump to the conclusion that Brown is the hero of the piece, but the knowing will readily recognize the above description as typical of the O'Neill villain. "Frank good-humoured face", "disciplined restraint", "normal intelligence", and above all "blond and blue-eyed"—these are anathema to O'Neill. Consider now the hero of the play, Dion Anthony. "He is about the same height as young Brown but lean and wiry, without repose, continually in restless nervous movement. His face is masked. The mask is a fixed forcing of his own face—dark, spiritual, poetic, passionately supersensitive, helplessly unprotected in its childlike, religious faith in life—into the expression of a mocking, reckless, defiant, gayly scoffing and sensual young Pan." Here we have the opposition between two types that is to be found in most of O'Neill's plays: the lean, dark, sensitive, poetic hero and the thick-set, fair, normal villain.

We find it in *Beyond the Horizon*. Robert Mayo is described as a "tall, slender young man of twenty-three. There is a touch of the poet about him expressed in his high forehead and wide, dark eyes. His features are delicate and refined, leaning to weakness in the mouth and chin". His brother Andrew is described as "twenty-seven years old, and opposite type to Robert—husky, sun-bronzed, /483/ handsome in a large-featured, manly fashion—a son of the soil, intelligent in a shrewd way, but with nothing of the intellectual about him". The predominant note in the description of Andrew is disparagement: "handsome in a manly fashion" (a fashion which evidently does not commend itself to O'Neill), "intelligent in a shrewd way". The antagonism of the author to Andrew is more obvious in another description of him in Act III. Here O'Neill says of him, "his eyes are keener and more alert. There is even a suggestion of ruthless cunning about them." It requires little imagination to see that Dion Anthony and Robert are one and the same person, just as Andrew and William Brown are the same.

Consider the descriptions of the three important male characters in *The Straw*. Bill Carmody: "He is a man of fifty, heavy-set and round-shouldered, with long muscular arms and swollen-veined, hairy hands. His face is bony and ponderous, his nose, short and squat, his mouth large, thick-lipped and harsh; his complexion mottled—red, purple-streaked, and freckled; his hair, short and stubby with a bald spot on the crown. The expression of his small, blue eyes is one of selfish cunning". Fred Nicholls: "He is a young fellow of twenty-three, stockily built, fair-haired, handsome in a commonplace,

conventional mold His manner is obviously an attempt at suave gentility, he has an easy taking smile and a ready laugh, but there is a petty calculating expression in his small, observing, blue eyes" And now Exhibit C, Stephan Murray "Murray is thirty years old—a tall, slender, rather unusual looking fellow with a pale face, sunken under high cheek bones, lined about the eyes and mouth, jaded and worn for one still so young His intelligent, large hazel eyes have a tired, dispirited expression in repose, but can quicken instantly with a concealment mechanism of mocking, careless humour whenever his inner privacy is threatened. . . His manner as revealed by his speech—nervous, inquisitive, alert—seems more an acquired quality than any part of his real nature" Obviously in Stephan Murray we have still another Pan-like Dion Anthony It is hardly necessary to add that Carmody and Fred Nicholls are the antagonists—condemned to villainy by their stocky build and their blue eyes

In *Diff'rent* there is no single male antagonist, but the hero runs true to form He is Caleb Williams and O'Neill describes him as "tall and powerfully built, about thirty. Black hair, keen, dark eyes, face rugged and bronzed, mouth obstinate and good-natured". Lest the reader suppose that Caleb lacks some of the qualities attributed to the other heroes, we offer further description of him from Act II. "His face wears its set expression of an emotionless mask but his eyes cannot conceal an inward struggle, a baffled and painful attempt to comprehend, a wounded look of bewildered hurt" Here again is the mask which covers the inward struggle

Another baffled hero is Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*—"a quiet-mannered Negro boy with a queerly baffled sensitive face". Inasmuch as Jim is a Negro, we may safely assume that he has the *sine qua non* of the O'Neill hero, large dark eyes. The hero of *Desire Under the Elms* is still another dark-eyed, baffled, sensitive soul. So is Michael Cape, the hero of *Welded*. So is Orin Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra* So is . . . but need we go on?<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that every male character who is described as dark-eyed and sensitive is a protagonist and every male character who has blue eyes is an antagonist. And it is obvious, /484/ I think, that all the O'Neill heroes are essentially one and the same person. They are as stereotyped and uniform as Ford cars; slight variations in body styles there may be, but the motors are of the same design. Nor need we speculate long as to who this person is who keeps popping up as the leading figure in most of the plays It is Eugene O'Neill

Inasmuch as the descriptions of the heroes fit him, and inasmuch as several of the plays are autobiographical, it is reasonable to suppose that all the heroes are projections of O'Neill's personality. Even Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* is O'Neill in black-face<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he might easily have followed the precedent set by the writers of paper-covered boys' books in the naming of his plays, thus. *Eugene O'Neill the Boy Architect*, *Eugene O'Neill on a New England Farm*, *Eugene O'Neill in Harlem*, et cetera.

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that these heroes of O'Neill's, although they are often described as poetic, are never poets. Their poetic natures do not help

them to produce anything, they do not even bring them happiness, for in O'Neill plays the happiness of the hero is in inverse proportion to his sensibility. They are described as intelligent, but they manifest their intelligence only in their vague maunderings concerning their vaguer emotions. To exalt these pitiable figures, as O'Neill does, to establish them as Nature's noblemen merely because they have failed to find happiness is the height of romantic absurdity. And this high level of romantic absurdity O'Neill does not fail to maintain in the treatment of his female characters.

Although physically the female characters present no such uniformity as was found in the male characters, nevertheless they are emotionally all of a piece. Almost all are sexually abnormal, rare is the character who is not either a prostitute or a wanton or a nymphomaniac. Let us call the roll. The female character in *Thirst*, the heroine in *The Web*, the female character in *The Long Voyage Home*, all the women in *Moon of the Caribbees*, both the female characters in *Anna Christie*, the woman in *Welded*, Cybel in *The Great God Brown*, Pompeia in *Lazarus Laughed*—all are prostitutes.

Aside from those mentioned there are also a number of wantons, sexual delinquents who have managed to maintain their amateur standing. In this class would be included Ada and Mrs. Fife in *Dynamo*, the only character to appear on the stage in *Before Breakfast*, the heroine in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, Abbie Putnam, the heroine in *Desire Under the Elms*, Eleanor Cape, the heroine of *Welded*, and Christine Mannon in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. As for Emma Crosby, the heroine in *Diff'rent* and Nina, the leading figure in *Strange Interlude*, they are best classified as nymphomaniacs.

There are a few normal female characters, but their very normality seems to gain for them the playwright's contempt. Almost invariably they are portrayed as narrow, petty, bigoted and lacking in understanding. They are in striking contrast to the sexually abnormal female characters, who are presented as noble, spiritual, sympathetic, and wise. This contrast is clearly defined in *The Great God Brown*. Here, the reader is first introduced to Margaret, the wife of Dion Anthony the hero. She is a normal girl of whom O'Neill says, "[she is] the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race." She loves her husband because he is clever and poetic and romantic, but she does not understand him and she never finds out his real nature, the nature that he hides behind a /485/ mask. Once he takes off the mask and tries to show her what he is really like, but she becomes frightened and does not recognize him. On the other hand, there is Cybel the prostitute. It is to her that Dion comes for sympathy and understanding. Their relations are purely platonic (the relations of the O'Neill hero to the O'Neill prostitute are always platonic), she is his counselor, his teacher. Only to her does he show his true, inner nature.

Contrast the loose Mrs. Fife with the upright Mrs. Light in *Dynamo*. Mrs. Fife is sympathetic, kind, and loving even to those who hate her. Mrs. Light, secure in the knowledge of her own virtue, is bitter, hard, and deceitful. By her hardness and treachery she drives her son from the house and it is in

the Fife household that he finds solace and comfort. In *Lazarus Laughed* it is the courtesan Pompeia, of all the people in the play, who understands the teaching of Lazarus and is willing to undergo death with him. The nobility of the prostitute in *Welded* is such that the hero kneels before her and refuses to rise until she forgives him for having ventured to approach her. Then he kisses her on the forehead and calls her "Sister." The reader must not laugh—the playwright's intent was not satirical.

In *Anna Christie* the heroine, a former prostitute, shows the greatness of her character in refusing because of her past life to marry the man she loves. It is made plain that she is really "pure" in soul and that circumstance rather than desire led her to prostitution. Nevertheless she tells her lover what she has been, and he, as she expected he would, curses her and leaves her. This unselfish love, this quixotic disregard for their own happiness is common to almost all of the sexually abnormal female characters: Anna, Marthy, Cybel, Mrs. Fife, Pompeia. They are all so wise, so understanding, so generous, so noble—and so improbable. To sum up, when a woman walks on stage in an O'Neill highbrow melodrama, the chances are ten to one that she is in some way sexually abnormal and if she is, she is certain to be the finest character on the stage.

### III

<sup>1</sup> It is only to be expected that unreal and exaggerated characters will talk in an unreal and exaggerated fashion. The diction in O'Neill is just as grandiose and extravagant and unreal as the characters who use it. It is a rare O'Neill hero who does not stop the action of the play now and again to deliver a long metaphysical address on the meaning of his existence and it is a rare O'Neill prostitute who does not get off some good things on Life and Man and Love—in capitals.

*The Great God Brown* offers many good examples of this grandiose, pseudo-poetic diction, speeches where a needle of thought is hidden in a haystack of verbiage.<sup>1</sup> This one is typical:—

DION Brown will still need me—to reassure him he's alive! I've loved, lusted, won and lost, sang and wept! I've been life's lover! I've fulfilled her will and if she's through with me now it's only because I was too weak to dominate her in turn. It isn't enough to be her creature, you've got to create her or she requests you to destroy yourself.

This next passage is a soliloquy. The speaker is at the time a high-school senior —

DION (*with a suffering bewilderment*). Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colours of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why /486/ must I pretend to scorn in order to pity? Why must I hide



myself in self-contempt in order to understand? Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness? Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating, I who love peace and friendship? (*Clasping his hands above in supplication*) Why was I born without a skin, O God, that I must wear armour in order to touch or to be touched?

Here is a sample of the philosophy that Cybel the prostitute hands out. —

CYBEL You may be important but your life's not. There's millions of it born every second. Life can cost too much even for a sucker to afford it—like everything else. And it's not sacred—only the you inside is. The rest is earth.

The prostitute in *Welded* has a little different brand of philosophy. In the following passage she is preaching it to Cape, the hero:—

WOMAN. I was thinking of the whole game. It's funny, ain't it?

CAPE (*slowly*) You mean—Life?

WOMAN. Sure. You got to laugh, ain't you? You got to loin to like it!

CAPE (*this makes an intense impression on him. He nods his head several times*). Yes! That's it! That's exactly it! That goes deeper than wisdom—to learn to love life—to accept it and be exalted—that's the one faith left us! (*Then with a tremulous smile*) Good-by. I've joined your church. I'm going home.

Here the sensitive O'Neill hero engaged in the Higher Love gives vent to his passion:—

CAPE Listen! Often I wake up in the night—in a black world, alone in a hundred million years of darkness. I feel like crying out to God for mercy because life lives! Then instinctively I seek you—my hand touches you! You are there—beside me—alive—with you I become a whole, a truth! Life guides me back through the hundred million years to you. It reveals a beginning in unity that I may have faith in the unity of the end!

These passages are typical of the plays they are taken from, and the plays are typical of O'Neill's work, as a whole. Is there very much difference between the pomposity of the last passage, for example, and the line, "I scorn your filthy lucre, Jack Dalton!" Is not the one as unreal as the other? They are both examples of rant, of melodramatic diction and both are suited to melodramatic characters and melodramatic plots.

#### IV

O'Neill's plot structure reveals a total lack of dramatic sense. The drama, because of its temporal and mechanical limitations, is a medium for the expression of swift, forceful, and animated action. In O'Neill the action consists almost entirely of a lumbering analysis of the obsessed and even

insane minds of the characters in his plays. Insanity is to be found in most of his plays and in many cases the entire structure of the play is based on some mad obsession of one of the characters. In *Gold*, for example, the plot is woven around the obsession of Isaiah Bartlett that he has discovered a chest full of gold and jewels. His determination to hunt for the treasure is so great that even the sickness and subsequent death of his wife fail to move him from his purpose. Later on he learns that the treasure is worthless, and, overcome by remorse, he drops dead. Isaiah Bartlett is presented to us from the very first scene as mad. The play is an analysis of a diseased mind, a case study for a psychiatrist; but it evokes no sympathy from the reader since the leading character is too far removed from the realm of common experience. The deaths of Isaiah and his wife are purely mechanical attempts to get at the emotions of the audience. I say mechanical, /487/ because the deaths are not justified either logically or emotionally.

This mechanical method of evoking an emotional response from the audience by depicting insanity, death, and suicide is characteristic of O'Neill plays just as it is characteristic of the melodrama in general. Perhaps the most flagrant example is that offered by *Marco Millions*. The author's purpose is to satirize the modern Babbitt in the person of Marco Polo. Marco is shown at the court of the Grand Khan of China as a greedy, uncultured, soulless money-grubber. The Princess Kukachin, who is betrothed to the Emperor of Persia, falls in love with Marco and she begs the sage Khan, her father, that he be permitted to command the fleet that is to escort her to her future husband. Characteristically, Marco Polo asks for permission to trade in the ports along the way. Before the end of the voyage, Kukachin discovers the true nature of Marco and she is overcome with disgust at his pettiness. Here the play should end. The author's purpose has been accomplished. Marco has been shown in his true colours—the business man has been satirized. Is it not enough? But no—the audience must shed crocodile tears. The author adds another scene wherein it is shown that Kukachin, although now the wife of a man who is everything that she has been taught to love and respect, is pining away and will soon die. The death of the princess is in no way necessary to the completion of the plot. It is literary *lagniappe* which spoils the play but wrings another tear from the audience. It is the O'Neill touch, the artist's signature—for unjustified death and suicide and insanity are to O'Neill plays what the sterling mark is to silver.

In the trilogy, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill's latest contribution to the drama, the stage is converted into a veritable shambles. The toll of the Grim Reaper is two deaths by murder and two suicides out of a total of five principal characters. This play like the rest is based on madness. The central theme is incestuous love. It is not the incest that is occasionally found in Greek tragedy, in the Oedipus tale, for example, where the incest is accidental and the tragedy derives from the discovery that incest has been committed, nor yet is it the subconscious desire for incest that the Freudians tell us is the *primum mobile* of our emotional life. In the O'Neill play

the characters have conscious incestuous desires Christine becomes the mistress of Adam Brant because he reminds her of her son Orin, from whom she has been separated by the war Lavinia's incestuous desires are even more apparent Christine says to her "I know you, Vinnie! I've watched you ever since you were little, trying to do exactly what you're doing now! You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You've always schemed to steal my place!" And as for Orin, he makes a definite proposal to his sister Lavinia that they live together as man and wife The reader sympathizes with the characters in the Greek story for they are perfectly normal, but the characters in the O'Neill play are so far removed from normal experience that they can interest him only as unusual cases of abnormal psychology

It is by the use of abnormal and insane characters, violent death and suicide that O'Neill evokes unjustified emotional response from his audience) The reader can better judge of the extent of O'Neill's use of mechanical and melodramatic violence from Barret Clark's summary in his appreciative criticism of O'Neill He says "Of the thirty-five O'Neill plays I have seen or read, there are only five in which there is no murder, death, suicide, or insanity In the others I /488/ find a total of six suicides and one unsuccessful attempt, ten important murders (not counting incidental episodes referred to in the text), nineteen deaths, nearly all due to violence, and six cases of insanity" Mr Clark's statement is conservative he does not include in the cases of insanity those borderline cases of abnormal obsession around which so many of the plots revolve

(Even in the less violent incidents of the plot O'Neill exaggerates his effects with all the melodramatic vigour at his command In the handling of dramatic situations and of the reversals of fortune which befall the characters, he shows all the delicacy and subtlety of a circus advertisement He uses dramatic irony, that delicate rapier, as a shillelah with which to cudgel his characters He toys with them as a boy plays with a fly whose wings he has torn off Indeed, an O'Neill character has only to express a desire for something in order to get just the opposite before the end of the act *The Long Voyage Home* offers a typical example! The scene is the bar of a cheap saloon near the London waterfront Joe, the proprietor, does a little crimping on the side. Just now he is trying to find an able-bodied seaman to ship on the *Amundra* for a voyage around Cape Horn His task is difficult because the ship has a bad reputation the pay is low, the food is poor, and the captain is a slave-driver Furthermore, the voyage around the Horn is a long one Soon four sailors enter the bar. They have just been paid off and all except one, Olsen the Swede, are drunk. For years Olsen has been planning to go back to Sweden, there to settle down on a farm; but every time he had been paid off, he had squandered his money in drunken celebration. For this reason, he refuses to drink Another thing, Olsen's mother is very old now and he is anxious to see her before she dies. Now comes the *dénouement* In spite of the fact that Olsen is the only member of the party who is sober and the only one who refuses to drink, in spite of the fact that Olsen is the only

one who does not want to go to sea and the only one who has a good reason for not shipping again—it is Olsen who is drugged, robbed, and then put aboard the *Amundra*. There is one more effect needed to make the case perfect and O'Neill does not fail to add it. Olsen is the only one who had shipped on the *Amundra* before and knew of its reputation. The reversal is now complete in every detail, but it does not thrill. It is so artificially perfect that it loses all suspense: poor Olsen never had a chance.

We get much the same thing in *Beyond the Horizon*. Robert Mayo, one of the dark-eyed type of male character, longs for what is "beyond the horizon." He plans to go to sea in his uncle's ship. O'Neill makes him stay on the farm. Andrew Mayo loves the farm, but O'Neill forces him to go to sea. Andrew had loved Ruth, but she marries Robert. Needless to say, she finds out later that they are mismatched and that she should have married Andrew. By the time Robert dies and Andrew and Ruth are free to marry, Andrew finds that he no longer loves her—in fact, he hates her. Have not the torturing frustrations gone far enough? No, O'Neill gives his characters another whack: he has Robert just before his death elicit from Andrew a promise that he will take care of Ruth. The play ends on the idea that Andrew will marry Ruth. And Ruth? How does she react to Andrew's implied proposal? Is she at last to know happiness? "She remains silent, gazing at him [Andrew] dully with the sad humility of exhaustion, her mind already sinking back into that spent calm beyond the further troubling of any hope . . . as the curtain falls." So every- /489/ thing that Andrew wants, Robert gets, and everything that Robert wants, Andrew gets, and Ruth, too, gets only frustration and disappointment. Here again, the complete and perfect frustration of the characters destroys all suspense. The audience knows what is coming, after the first act, they can predict the action of the rest of the play.

Dramatic irony is the gentle, mocking laughter of the gods, but for O'Neill it becomes a taunting sadism. The plays I have cited are not isolated cases, for the over-use of dramatic irony to the point where it ceases to be either dramatic or ironic is just as characteristic of O'Neill as his over-use of violent death and suicide. It is another mechanical means of evoking an exaggerated emotional response from the audience even though it sacrifices artistic unity.

The audience derives pleasure from tragedy through a catharsis or purging of their emotions. This catharsis comes from reflection on the play. In melodrama the emotional response is too violent to be satisfied in this way, there must be a more immediate satisfaction. For this reason the happy ending is used in melodrama to so great an extent. It must not be supposed that because so many O'Neill plays end in death or suicide that these endings are necessarily unhappy. On the contrary, almost all the plays end either happily or on an optimistic expression of hope. *Lazarus Laughed* ends with the hero being burned at the stake; but the ending is happy, for Lazarus is happy even while he is dying—he laughs for he knows that there is no death. In *Desire Under the Elms* the hero and heroine are marched off to jail for the murder of their child, but they are happy for they are now certain of

their love for each other. *All God's Chillun Got Wings* ends with the heroine becoming insane but the ending is a happy one. The insanity brings her back to her childhood days and once again she becomes her husband's sweetheart. So too, in *The Great God Brown* and in *Beyond the Horizon*, the audience gets the smug satisfaction of knowing that the hero, although he dies at the end, has triumphed and the villain has failed even while appearing to succeed. It is hardly necessary to add that there are a number of plays such as *Welded*, *The Straw*, *Strange Interlude*, and *Anna Christie* where the ending is the conventional happy one of lovers meeting or being reconciled and living happily ever after. The happy ending is a necessity in the melodrama and so it is not to be wondered at if O'Neill includes it in his box of tricks. He cudgels his heroes, who are projections of himself, with what can only be described as masochistic fury, but he makes it plain just before they die or commit suicide that they have in reality triumphed. <sup>1</sup>

## v

O'Neill has been called a great dramatic experimenter, but I think the value of his experimentation is greatly over-rated. He experimented first with expressionism, chiefly in *The Hairy Ape* and in *Emperor Jones*. Both plays are psychological studies with almost no dramatic power. Yank in *The Hairy Ape* is only a symbol who never succeeds in coming to life. He draws no sympathy from the audience and seemingly none from the playwright. He is merely a puppet responding to O'Neill's tugs at the strings. Jones in *Emperor Jones* is no more real than Yank. The play is a monologue which describes the successive mental states which fear and hunger induce in the central figure. In this play O'Neill introduces one of those novel tricks which have enhanced his reputation as an experimenter. From the beginning of the play to the end, the audience hears the /490/ sound of tom-toms. The tom-toms begin in a steady rhythm of seventy-two beats per minute, the rate of the normal pulse. Then as the play progresses the speed of the tom-tom is gradually and continuously accelerated until at the end of the play it is going at a feverish pace. The physiological effect on the audience is obvious. The psychological effect of the tom-tom is produced not through the speeches and actions of the characters, but directly by the sound itself. And the monotonous rhythm acts as powerfully on the audience as it does on Jones in the play. It is not my purpose here to discuss the propriety (in an artistic sense) of substituting for a more substantial plot structure a mechanical device in order to create the atmosphere for the play. I would merely point out that the tom-tom in *Emperor Jones*, although a new device, produced no change in the established technique of the drama. The use of the tom-tom is a trick whose only virtue is its novelty; it cannot be used again and it has not been used since.

In *The Great God Brown*, O'Neill tried another experiment. In this play the characters at times wear masks which are intended to symbolize the duality of their natures. When a speech is expressive of the outward character, the character which the world sees, the speaker wears a mask, when he

speaks according to his true, inner nature, he takes off the mask. This "experiment", rightly considered, is merely a method of labelling the speeches of the characters. It cannot be considered an advance on modern dramatic technique. Indeed it is a step back, for only a poor artist needs labels to make his intentions clear.

In *Strange Interlude* O'Neill uses another type of label, the aside. Here the actors deliver the lines in the usual manner but follow each speech with an oral expression of their thoughts. In other words, the audience is treated to a series of explanatory notes on the true emotions of the characters in the play. It is a confession on the part of the playwright that he cannot express himself in the dramatist's medium.

This experimentation is intended only to hide defective craftsmanship and to tickle the fancy of the audience. It is mere pandering to the taste of the moment. The intelligentsia whose patronage has raised O'Neill to his present eminence, blinded by their intellectual and emotional romanticism, mistake these little tricks of the showman for bold originality. O'Neill shows them a succession of thin-skinned poeticules and they hail them as tragic heroes. He paints a picture of a chimerical, daydream world and they shout, "It is true reality." They mistake extravagant "purple passages" for poetry and a maudlin bathos for power. In short, they call that tragedy which is merely violent and unbalanced melodrama. /491/

## A DECADE OF SILENCE: 1935 – 1945

With the memory of a pseudo-Greek tragic trilogy, a sentimental comedy, and the fiasco of dramatized religious ecstasy to sustain them, the admirers of Eugene O'Neill were forced to wait for nearly twelve years before they could attend an opening night of one of his new plays. With his departure from Sea Island, Georgia, for the Pacific Northwest in 1936, O'Neill fell abruptly silent and, artistically, all but disappeared from view for more than a decade. As a person, he still commanded attention, but as far as his plays were concerned, only rumors and speculation were forthcoming.

Several factors contributed to these years of silence that followed hard upon what had seemed to be the start of an even greater career. First was O'Neill's never-ending search for a suitable place to live, which in the ensuing years carried him into apartments, hotels, and houses in Oregon and California before he settled on the secluded Chinese-style mansion, Tao House, in the San Francisco Bay area. Second was his health, rapidly deteriorating under the prolonged agony of a nerve affliction similar to and long thought to be Parkinson's disease. Always, even as a young man, prone to a pronounced trembling of the hands, O'Neill now found himself at times unable to hold a pencil or to use a typewriter. He was equally incapable of dictation. Third was his general depression at the state of the world, especially the invasion and subjection of France, his one-time home. He vowed he would send none of his plays to the commercial theatre, which he insisted was uninterested in his tragic themes so long as the global conflict endured.

A fourth reason for the years of silence involved estrangement from his children by his two earlier marriages, culminating in the tragic suicide of his brilliant elder son, Eugene, Jr., and the disinheriting of the children by his second wife, son Shane and daughter Oona. None of the details of these events is pertinent to the discussion here, but they were indeed severe trials in O'Neill's life. The fifth, and possibly the most significant, reason was his

devotion to the development of his super-cycle of plays, eventually entitled *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed*—a task that continually inspired him but simultaneously frustrated his other serious artistic endeavors

As early as 1932 there had been rumors that O'Neill planned a series of three plays designed to show the history of a family from the Revolution to the present, and during the run of *Ah, Wilderness'* news accounts were published about four plays in a series that would take "years to complete" and several nights to produce. By 1935 the total had reached seven, starting with 1828 and covering five generations. Promises to have the first play to the Theatre Guild for the 1936–1937 season were made public, and by October 1935 the Guild said there would be eight separate dramas covering 125 years. More conflicting reports of plays "nearly ready" emanated from California, and by 1937 the Guild seemed committed to do two per season for four years. In the next few years the projected total reached eleven.

It was not until after O'Neill's death, in the revival period of the 1950's and 1960's, that any of the cycle plays were revealed. Most of the plays were destroyed, but a few managed to survive and were produced. The entire outline of the cycle has been reconstructed, but the thread of the narrative can only be conjectured. Whatever the ultimate plan might have been, the task was so terrifically time-consuming and demanding on O'Neill's energies that it most certainly contributed to his physical decline and inability to finish the plays in a form suitable for release. In view of the fact that he was at the same time working on single plays, which eventually were produced apart from the cycle, and on a further series of one-act plays, it is a tribute to his genius that he completed as much of the cycle as he did.

International acclaim came to O'Neill during this decade when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1937. Long critical studies of O'Neill had already appeared in many languages, and his position in modern world drama was constantly being evaluated and reevaluated. The Nobel award was therefore a culmination of all the serious consideration given him up to that time and marked the permanent arrival of American drama onto the stage of major world literature. While reaction to the award was generally favorable, there was also sharp dissent, as the following selections reveal, but nothing could alter the fact that world recognition had now been brought in the highest manner to this dedicated artist who so relentlessly pursued the tragic theme in drama as had not been done in recent theatre history.

#### THE PLAYS OF 1935 – 1945

*It is impossible to pinpoint the exact dates of all of the plays O'Neill worked on or completed during this period. Only one, The Iceman Cometh, is known to have been copyrighted in 1940, and one play of the cycle, A Touch of the Poet, was not copyrighted until 1946. But because the cycle received its greatest attention during this decade, and because most of the plays were*



*conceived or begun during this time, they will be listed here. No new plays by O'Neill were produced anywhere from 1935 to 1945*

General title of the cycle *A Tale of Possessors Self-Dispossessed* (Original title *A Touch of the Poet*)

Play I (The) *Greed of the Meek* 1776–1793

Play II *And Give Me (Us) Death* 1806–1807

*(Originally these two were in reverse order. O'Neill found them too long for single plays and planned to split them, which would have given the eleven-play total at one time reported, even though the known titles total but nine. These plays were both destroyed.)*

Play III *A Touch of the Poet* 1828 (Original title (The) *Hair of the Dog*)  
The first play to be completed

Play IV *More Stately Mansions* 1837–1842 or later

Play V *The Calms of Capricorn* 1857

Play VI *The Earth's the Limit* 1858–1860

Play VII *Nothing Lost Save Honor* 1862–1870

Play VIII (The) *Man on Iron Horseback* 1876–1893

Play IX (The) *Hair of the Dog* 1900–1932 (Originally considered title *Twilight of the Possessors*)

*Another play, The Life of Bessie Bowen (Brown, Bolen), was apparently incorporated into the ninth play. Still another, The Last Conquest, also called The Thirteenth Apostle, is mentioned as a part of the cycle, but its place is unknown. As far as can be determined, all the plays with the exception of A Touch of the Poet and More Stately Mansions were destroyed by O'Neill and his wife.*

#### GENERAL CRITICISM

##### **"Minority Report"**

*Bernard De Voto*

You will find the majority opinion in nearly any paper you may pick up. Unquestionably most of the critics and most of the public who think about literature at all will regard the award of a Nobel Prize to Eugene O'Neill as a gratifying recognition of a great dramatic talent. A minority will not, however, and because what may be a signal weakness rather than a great strength of our literature is involved, *The Saturday Review* cannot let the occasion pass without expressing that minority opinion. For the Nobel Prize, although it was once awarded to Rabindranath Tagore, is supposed to recognize only the highest distinction in literature, and Mr. O'Neill falls short of that. He falls short of it both absolutely and relatively. Whatever his

international importance, he can hardly be called an artist of the first rank; he is hardly even one of the first-rate figures of his own generation in Amer-

Mr O'Neill's good fortune has been his misfortune. He came to Broadway from the little theater of cheesecloth and mandolutes at the exact moment when the preciosities of coterie art in general were caught up on the impetus of a national movement. That impetus alone would have conferred success on the mechanical novelties that he brought with him from Washington Square—the off-stage tom-toms, the timed throb of engines and dynamos, the masks alleged to be ever so meaningful, the sirens blowing in the fog. But he also brought with him more important guarantors of success, a training in dramaturgy supervised by George Pierce Baker, and, even more important than this, an inherited instinct for the theatrically effective. Calling on all these, Mr O'Neill composed some very good early plays; some of them remain among his best work but it would be absurd to call any of them great drama, and they cannot have figured in the Nobel award. A restless and extremely energetic intelligence, he was already beginning the experiments that were to confuse and confute him when his alliance with the Theatre Guild began.

It is not alleged against the Guild that it created that confusion, but that it contributed more than all other forces to the inflation of his reputation which is so disproportionate to his talents and achievements. There is such a thing as economic determinism of reputation and surely that has had a part here; but a much greater part was intellectual and social determinism. A foundation engaged in the development of dramatic art, the Guild was under every obligation of sense and sentiment to discover a great native dramatist. Need we be surprised that it discovered him in Mr. O'Neill? Its great prestige, its power to compel the admiration of multitudes, its lavish resources for spectacular presentation and for publicity no less, and its austere authority as an arbiter of judgment combined to elevate him to a grandeur which neither criticism nor the public has ventured to impeach. He has had every kind of success that a playwright can have: money, fame, the best directors and designers and actors of his time, a sumptuous collected edition, a critical acclaim so reverent that the more recent treatises discuss him in language usually considered sacrilegious when applied to the merely mortal, and now the Nobel Prize. Here is a great triumph, but a very large part of it is due to prestige and publicity. At best he is only the author of some extremely effective pieces for the theater. At worst he has written some of the most pretentiously bad plays of our time. He has never been what the Guild and the Nobel jury unite in calling him, a great dramatist.

It is not a derogation but only a definition to say that workable theatricality is the measure of successful playwrighting. In the theater the test is not: Is this true to the realities of human experience? Instead the test is: Is this fictitious representation satisfactory to the artificial conditions of the theater? With luck—or with genius—a play may pass both tests, but it must

pass the second, and if they are in conflict, the first must yield. The theater is under many limitations—the exigencies of space and time, the dictation of the literal, which requires an actual Peter Pan to swing through actual air on the end of an actual wire in the presence of practicable props, and especially the necessary conditions of people meeting together as an audience, the lowered intelligence, the lulled critical faculty, the enhanced emotionalism and suggestibility of a group, the substitution of emotional accord for the desire to experience and understand that is fed by other forms of literature. Under all these limitations, the theater succeeds in its own terms. They are terms of the momentarily effective, not the permanently true or the permanently illuminating. Only small and superficial portions of human life can be honestly and thoroughly represented in such terms and under such limitations. Quite properly, the theater does not care. Where honest and thorough presentation of life makes available material, the theater will use it, where it does not, the theater must and cheerfully will depart from it for the sake of the theatrical values. They, the theatrical values, are concerned with something else.

A great dramatist, I take it, is one who has somehow managed to transcend the limitations of the theater and, while preserving the theatrical values that pass the second test, to add to them some profundity of human experience, human understanding, or human enlightenment that brings the art of the theater into the same area as the highest art of fiction or poetry. Those who have transcended them—we need name no more than Shaw and Ibsen—have done so by reason of great intelligence, great imagination, and great understanding. The whole truth about Mr. O'Neill is that his gigantic effort to transcend them has been of an altogether different kind. He is a fine playwright who is not sufficiently endowed with those qualities to be a great dramatist but who has tried to substitute for them a set of merely mechanical devices.

Let us recall his career. The charmingly romantic one-act plays were young Greenwich Village. They revolted against the dead theater of the day chiefly by means of sweetness. They were full of hairy chests, gentlemen rankers burning with despair, and a traditional rhetoric about the sea—the implacable enemy, the immortal lover who covets man, the inappeasable devourer, man's elder love, man's testing ground, the oldest mistress, the primal call. They had novelties of decoration but their effectiveness, like the dialects spoken by the sailors, came from time-honored tricks by which generations of playwrights had lifted the audience out of their seats for the tense half-second that means effectiveness in the theater.

A group of miscellaneous plays followed, some expressionistic, some realistic, some successful in their own terms, some obviously tending toward the confusion that was soon to follow. Two of them, "The Emperor Jones" and "Anna Christie," are among the best work that Mr. O'Neill has ever done, of his other plays, only "Ah, Wilderness!" is comparable to them. "Beyond the Horizon" was still youthfully romantic in its conception of disease as heroic, and still very Washington Square in its clichés about

sex-starved New England "The Emperor Jones" was a triumphant experiment in the drama of fantasy, which may last longer than anything else he has written. It was a very effective assault on the emotions, and that path, if followed to the end, might have led him well beyond such work of his colleagues as "Beggar on Horseback." But in "The Hairy Ape" it began to be apparent that expressionism and Washington Square, the masks and the ballet, the attraction of the allusively and immensely vague, were betraying him. Already they seemed subtly counterfeit. "Anna Christie" was something else. It remains his most effective play. But note carefully that its effectiveness is theatrical—of the theater, not of life. The romantic conception of a prostitute, the Greenwich Village cliché of "dat ol davil sea," the flagrant falsification of life in the oath scene at the end were magnificent theater, magnificent craftsmanship, but surely they were the very antithesis of great drama. It should be noted here, also, that with "All God's Chillun Got Wings" he began the use of insanity as a solution of all dramatic problems which makes for thrilling effects on the stage but falls short of explaining human life.

Mr. O'Neill then dived into the infinite.<sup>6</sup> He undertook to transcend the theater, to break the shackles of mortality, to work with the immortal urges and the eternal truths. His characters would not be men and women merely, they would be Man and Woman, they would even be Earth Man and Earth Woman. And this mighty effort to be a great dramatist inexorably proved that he lacked intellectual, emotional, and imaginative greatness. In the theater he is a master craftsman. But in the cosmos he is a badly rattled Villager straining titanically with platitudes, and laboring to bring forth ineffabilities whose spiritual and intellectual content has been a farcical anticlimax to the agonies of birth.

"Lazarus Laughs," [sic] "The Great God Brown," "Marco Millions," "Dynamo"—one or another of them must be the silliest play of our time. The gorgeous mounting which the Guild gave "Marco Millions" veiled the triviality of the play. Mr. O'Neill was trying to be a metaphysical Sinclair Lewis but he did not make the grade. The play echoes a hundred forgotten mellers, trying to transmute them to poetry and philosophy. But the immortal wisdom of the east comes out very much like Sidney Smith's laundryman in the *Chicago Tribune*, and oriental loveliness and mystery have a heavy odor of Fu Manchu. "Dynamo" will long fascinate connoisseurs of the incredible and contains some of the most amazing nonsense ever spoken seriously in the theater. But one comes finally to the judgment that "The Great God Brown" is the worst of them. The design is once more to transcend, to Go Beyond—by means of Cybele the Earth Mother and Dionysus, the spirit of anarchic joy that treads down the stale conventions of this world, and the frustrate human spirit tortured and betrayed. But the result is uneasily one of a Model T Euripides—and a feeling that if George White<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>George White, New York producer during the first decades of the twentieth century. His popular revues entitled *Scandals* competed with Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies*. —Ed

ever set out to do a March of the Earth Mothers, it would look very much like this

Mr O'Neill has called himself a poet and a mystic. In these plays he is trying to press beyond the theater into great drama by means of poetry and mysticism focussed through symbolism. But it is the very essence of symbolism that the meaning symbolically conveyed must be a distinguished meaning—a meaning profound /4/ and exalted—or the result will be preposterous. And Mr O'Neill has no such meaning to convey. He has only a number of platitudes which would be comfortably accommodated to the one-acters of Washington Square from which he graduated, or to Dads' Night at a prep school drama festival, but which come out flat and unchanged through as elaborate a mechanism as was ever devised to amplify inanities.

The same lack of profundity, subtlety, and distinguished imagination is quite as clear in the next cycle where, turning from symbolism, Mr O'Neill occupied himself with racial myths and the unconscious mind. Probably the Nobel award was based on "Strange Interlude" and "Mourning Becomes Electra," and yet these plays only emphasize what the others had made clear. Here all the strains meet and blend—the novelties of the little theater substituting for knowledge of the human heart, dodges and devices, a fortissimo assertion of significance, and a frantic grappling with what seem to be immensities but turn out to be one-syllable ideas and mostly wrong at that. The biggest wind-machine in our theatrical history is used to assist the enunciation of platitudes. Mr O'Neill is dealing with ideas that elude him and straining for achievements beyond his power. Now it may well be that what he tries to do in these plays cannot be done in the theater at all. But a more flagrant point is that the significances he announces to us are elementary and even rudimentary. The intention is again cosmic but the meaning is very simple indeed, and though the effects are sometimes marvellously successful as theater they are false as life. Many times these plays reach the highest possible level of theatrical effectiveness, by reason of a superb craftsmanship working for the ends of the theater in the theater's terms. (With an overtone from many generations of sure-fire stuff, and the ghost of Monte Cristo raising a finger aloft and intoning "One!") But it is just that—it is not something more. Malicious animal magnetism—destroying an unloved husband, a box of poison pills on papa's corpse—that is an expert playwright bringing the audience out of its chairs for the golden half-second. But it is not a sudden flood of light cast by genius into the dark recesses of the soul—it is not great drama giving us understanding more abundantly. Mr O'Neill intended it to be that, and the burden of the Nobel award is that he succeeded. But what does he tell us, what does he show us, that we did not know before? Wherein is his wisdom, his revelation? Nowhere do we encounter the finality or the reconciliation of great art, nowhere is any fragment of human life remade for us in understanding and splendor. What he tells us is simple, familiar, superficial, and even trite—and because of a shallow misunderstanding of Freud and windy mysticism, sometimes flatly

wrong It is not great drama for it is not great knowledge You may add a new volume to the Rover Boys series by setting the action in the unconscious mind, but they will still be the Rover Boys

Mr O'Neill has given us many pleasurable evenings in the theater, though he has also given us some pretty tiresome ones. But he has never yet given us an experience of finality, of genius working on the material proper to genius, of something profound and moving said about life Just why, then, the Nobel Prize? /16/

### **"Eugene O'Neill"**

*Lionel Trilling*

Whatever is unclear about Eugene O'Neill, one thing is certainly clear—his genius We do not like the word nowadays, feeling that it is one of the blurb words of criticism We demand that literature be a guide to life, and when we do that we put genius into a second place, for genius assures us of nothing but itself Yet when we stress the actionable conclusions of an artist's work, we are too likely to forget the power of genius itself, quite apart from its conclusions The spectacle of the human mind in action is vivifying; the explorer need discover nothing so long as he has adventured. Energy, scope, courage—these may be admirable in themselves. And in the end these are often what endure best The ideas expressed by works of the imagination may be built into the social fabric and taken for granted; or they may be rejected, or they may be outgrown But the force of their utterance comes to us over millennia We do not read Sophocles or Aeschylus for the right answer, we read them for the force with which they represent life and attack its moral complexity. In O'Neill, despite the many failures of his art and thought, this force is inescapable.

But a writer's contemporary audience is inevitably more interested in the truth of his content than in the force of its expression, and O'Neill himself has always been ready to declare his own ideological preoccupation. His early admirers—and their lack of seriousness is a reproach to American criticism—were inclined to insist that O'Neill's content was unimportant as compared to his purely literary interest and that he injured his art when he tried to think. But the appearance of "Days Without End" has made perfectly clear the existence of an organic and progressive unity of thought in all O'Neill's work and has brought it into the critical range of the two groups whose own thought is most sharply formulated, the Catholic and the Communist. Both discovered what O'Neill had frequently announced, the religious nature of all his effort.

Not only has O'Neill tried to encompass more of life than most American writers of his time but almost alone among them, he has persistently tried to solve it. When we understand this we understand that his stage devices are no fortuitous technique; his masks and abstractions, his double personali-

ties, his drum beats and engine rhythms are the integral and necessary expression of his temper of mind and the task it set itself. Realism is uncongenial to that mind and that task and it is not in realistic plays like "Anna Christie" and "The Straw" but rather in such plays as "The Hairy Ape," "Lazarus Laughs" [sic] and "The Great God Brown," where he is explaining the world in parable, symbol and myth, that O'Neill is most creative. Not the minutiae of life, not its feel and color and smell, not its nuance and humor, but its "great inscrutable forces" are his interest. He is always moving toward the finality which philosophy sometimes, and religion always, promises. Life and death, good and evil, spirit and flesh, male and female, the all and the one, [St.] Anthony and Dionysius—O'Neill's is a world of these antithetical absolutes such as religion rather than philosophy conceives, a world of pluses and minuses, and his literary effort is an algebraic attempt to solve the equations.

In one of O'Neill's earliest one-act plays, the now unprocurable "Fog," a Poet, a Business Man and a Woman with a Dead Child, shipwrecked and adrift in an open boat, have made fast to an iceberg. When they hear the whistle of a steamer, the Business Man's impulse is to call for help, but the Poet prevents him lest the steamer be wrecked on the fog-hidden berg. But a searching party picks up the castaways and the rescuers explain that they had been guided to the spot by a child's cries; the Child, however, has been dead a whole day. This little play is a crude sketch of the moral world that O'Neill is to exploit. He is to give an ever increasing importance to the mystical implications of the Dead Child, but his earliest concern is with the struggle between the Poet and the Business Man.

It is, of course, a struggle as old as morality, especially interesting to Europe all through its industrial nineteenth century, and it was now engaging America in the second decade of its twentieth. A conscious artistic movement had raised its head to declare irreconcilable strife between the creative and the possessive ideal. O'Neill was an integral part—indeed, he became the very symbol—of that Provincetown group which represented the growing rebellion of the American intellectual against a business civilization. In 1914 his revolt was simple and socialistic, in a poem in *The Call*<sup>1</sup> he urged the workers of the world not to fight, asking them if they wished to "bleed and groan—for Guggenheim" and "give your lives—for Standard Oil." By 1917 his feeling against business had become symbolized and personal. "My soul is a submarine," he said in a poem in *The Masses*<sup>2</sup>

My aspirations are torpedoes  
I will hide unseen  
Beneath the surface of life

<sup>1</sup>*The Call*, a left-wing newspaper in New York to which O'Neill was a frequent contributor of verse in his early career — Ed

<sup>2</sup>*The Masses*, then a new liberal periodical, in later years, as *The New Masses*, it became, along with *The Daily Worker*, a mouthpiece of American communism — Ed.

Watching for ships,  
 Dull, heavy-laden merchant ships,  
 Rust-eaten, grimy galleons of commerce  
 Wallowing with obese assurance,  
 Too sluggish to fear or wonder,  
 Mocked by the laughter of the waves  
 And the spit of disdainful spray

I will destroy them  
 Because the sea is beautiful.

The ships against which O'Neill directed his torpedoes were the cultural keels laid in the yards of American business and their hulls were first to be torn by artistic realism. Although we now see the often gross sentimentality of the "S S Glencarn" plays<sup>3</sup> and remember with O'Neill's own misgiving the vaudeville success of "In the Zone," we cannot forget that, at the time, the showing of a forecandle on the American stage was indeed something of a torpedo. Not, it is true, into the sides of Guggenheim and Standard Oil, but of the little people who wallowed complacently in their wake.

But O'Neill, not content with staggering middle-class complacency by a representation of how the other half lives, undertook to scrutinize the moral life of the middle class and dramatized the actual struggle between Poet and Business Man. In his first long play, "Beyond the Horizon," the dreamer destroys his life by sacrificing his dream to domesticity, and the practical creator, the farmer, destroys his by turning from wheat-raising to wheat-gambling. It is a conflict O'Neill is to exploit again and again. Sometimes, as in "Ile" or "Gold," the lust for gain transcends itself and becomes almost a creative ideal, but always its sordid origin makes it destructive. To O'Neill the acquisitive man, kindly and insensitive, practical and immature, became a danger to life and one that he never left off attacking.

But it developed, strangely, that the American middle class had no strong objection to being attacked and torpedoed, it seemed willing to be sunk for the insurance that was paid in a new strange coin. The middle class found that it consisted of two halves, bourgeoisie and booboisie. The booboisie might remain on the ship but the bourgeoisie could, if it would, take refuge on the submarine. [H. L.] Mencken and Nathan, who sponsored the O'Neill torpedoes, never attacked the middle class but only its boobyhood. Boobish and sophisticated, these were the two categories of art, spiritual freedom could be bought at the price of finding "Jurgen"<sup>4</sup> profound. And so, while the booboisie prosecuted "Desire under the Elms," the bourgeoisie swelled the subscription lists of the Provincetown Playhouse and helped the Wash-

<sup>3</sup>"Moon of the Caribbees," "Bound East for Cardiff," "In the Zone," and "The Long Voyage Home"—Ed

<sup>4</sup>"Jurgen" (James Branch Cabell, 1919) pokes fun at the foibles of the contemporary world, it attained a certain notoriety in its day for being "obscene"—Ed



ington Square Players to grow into the Theatre Guild. An increasingly respectable audience awarded O'Neill no less than three Pulitzer prizes, the medal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Yale Doctorate of Letters.

O'Neill did not win his worldly success by the slightest compromise of sincerity. Indeed, his charm consisted in his very integrity and hieratic earnestness. His position changed, not absolutely, but relatively to his audience, which was now the literate middle class caught up with the intellectual middle class. O'Neill was no longer a submarine; he had become a physician of souls. Beneath his iconoclasm his audience sensed reassurance.

The middle class is now in such literary disrepute that a writer's ability to please it is taken as the visible mark of an internal rottenness. But the middle class is people; prick them and they bleed, and whoever speaks sincerely to and for flesh and blood deserves respect. O'Neill's force derives in large part from the force of the moral and psychical upheaval of the middle class; it wanted certain of its taboos broken and O'Neill broke them. He was the Dion Anthony to its William Brown. Brown loved Dion; his love was a way of repenting for his own spiritual clumsiness.

Whoever writes sincerely about the middle class must consider the nature and the danger of the morality of "ideals," those phosphorescent remnants of a dead religion with which the middle class meets the world. This had been Ibsen's great theme, and now O'Neill undertook to investigate for America the destructive power of the ideal—not merely the sordid ideal of the Business Man but even the "idealistic" ideal of the Poet. The Freudian psychology was being discussed and O'Neill dramatized its simpler aspects in "Diff'rent" to show the effects of the repression of life. <sup>3</sup> Let the ideal of chastity repress the vital forces, he was saying, and from this fine girl you will get a filthy harridan. The modern life of false ideals crushes the affirmative and creative nature of man, Pan, forbidden the light and warmth of the sun, grows "sensitive and self-conscious and proud and revengeful"—becomes the sneering Mephistophelean mask of Dion.

The important word is *self-conscious*, for "ideals" are part of the "cheating gestures which constitute the vanity of personality." "Life is all right if you let it alone," says Cybel, the Earth Mother of "The Great God Brown." But the poet of "Welded" cannot let it alone; he and his wife, the stage directions tell us, move in circles of light that represent "auras of egotism" and the high ideals of their marriage are but ways each ego uses to get possession of the other. O'Neill had his answer to this problem of the possessive, discrete personality. Egotism and idealism, he tells us, are twin evils growing from man's suspicion of his life and the remedy is the laughter of Lazarus—"a triumphant, blood-stirring call to that ultimate attainment in which all prepossession with self is lost in an ecstatic affirmation of Life." The ecstatic affirmation of Life, pure and simple, is salvation. In the face of death and pain, man must reply with the answer of Kublai Kaan in "Marco Millions": "Be proud of life! Know in your heart that the living of life can be

noble! Be exalted by life! Be inspired by death! Be humbly proud! Be proudly grateful!"

It may be that the individual life is not noble and that it is full of pain and defeat, it would seem that Eileen Carmody in "The Straw" and Anna Christie are betrayed by life. But no. The "straw" is the knowledge that life is a "hopeless hope"—but still a hope. And nothing matters if you can conceive the whole of life. "Fog, fog, fog all bloody time," is the chord of resolution of "Anna Christie." "You can't see where you was going, no. Only dat ole devil, sea—she knows." The individual does not know, but life—the sea—knows.

To affirm that life exists and is somehow good—this, then, became O'Neill's quasi-religious poetic function, nor is it difficult to see why the middle class welcomed it. "Brown will still need me," says Dion, "to reassure him he's alive." What to do with life O'Neill cannot say, but there it is. For Ponce de Leon it is the Fountain of Eternity, "the Eternal Becoming which is Beauty." There it is, somehow glorious, somehow meaningless. In the face of despair one remembers that "Always spring comes again bearing life! Always forever again. Spring again! Life again!" To this cycle, even to the personal annihilation in it, the individual must say "Yes." Man inhabits a naturalistic universe and his glory lies in his recognition of its nature and assenting to it, man's soul, no less than the stars and the dust, is part of the Whole and the free man loves the Whole and is willing to be absorbed by it. In short, O'Neill solves the problem of evil by making explicit what men have always found to be the essence of tragedy—the courageous affirmation of life in the face of individual defeat.

But neither a naturalistic view of the universe nor a rapt assent to life constitutes a complete philosophic answer. Naturalism is the noble and realistic attitude that prepares the way for an answer, the tragic affirmation is the emotional crown of a philosophy. Spinoza—with whom O'Neill at this stage of his thought has an obvious affinity—placed between the two an ethic that arranged human values and made the world possible to live in. But O'Neill, faced with a tragic universe, unable to go beyond the febrilely passionate declaration, "Life is," finds the world impossible to live in. The naturalistic universe becomes too heavy a burden for him, its spirituality vanishes, it becomes a universe of cruelly blind matter. "Teach me to be resigned to be an atom," cries Darrell, the frustrated scientist of "Strange Interlude," and for Nina life is but "a strange dark interlude in the electrical display of God the father"—who is a God deaf, dumb and blind. O'Neill, unable now merely to accept the tragic universe and unable to support it with man's whole strength—his intellect and emotion—prepares to support it with man's weakness—his blind faith.

For the non-Catholic reader O'Neill's explicitly religious solution is likely to be not only insupportable but incomprehensible. Neither St. Francis nor St. Thomas can tell us much about it; it is neither a mystical ecstasy nor the reasoned proof of assumptions. But Pascal can tell us a great deal, for O'Neill's faith, like Pascal's, is a poetic utilitarianism—he needs it and *will*

have it O'Neill rejects naturalism and materialism as Pascal had rejected Descartes and all science. He too is frightened by "the eternal silence of the infinite spaces." Like Pascal, to whom the details of life and the variety and flux of the human mind were repugnant, O'Neill feels that life is empty—having emptied it—and can fill it only by faith in a loving God. The existence of such a God, Pascal knew, cannot be proved save by the heart's need, but this seemed sufficient and he stood ready to stupefy his reason to maintain his faith. O'Neill will do no less. It is perhaps the inevitable way of modern Catholicism in a hostile world.

O'Neill's rejection of materialism involved the familiar pulpit confusion of philosophical materialism with "crass" materialism, that is, with the preference of physical to moral well-being. It is therefore natural that "Dynamo," the play in which he makes explicit his anti-materialism, should present characters who are mean and little—that, though it contains an Earth Mother, she is not the wise and tragic Cybele but the fat and silly Mrs. Fife, the bovine wife of the atheist dynamo-tender. She, like other characters in the play, allies herself with the Dynamo-God, embodiment both of the materialistic universe and of modern man's sense of his own power. But this new god can only frustrate the forces of life, however much it at first seems life's ally against the Protestant denials, and those who worship it become contemptible and murderous.

And the contempt for humanity which pervades "Dynamo" continues in "Mourning Becomes Electra," creating, in a sense, the utter hopelessness of that tragedy. Aeschylus had ended his Atreus trilogy on a note of social reconciliation—after the bloody deeds and the awful pursuit of the Furies, society confers its forgiveness, the Furies are tamed to deities of hearth and field. "This day there is a new Order born"; but O'Neill's version has no touch of this resolution. There is no forgiveness in "Mourning Becomes Electra" because, while there is as yet no forgiving God in O'Neill's cosmos, there is no society either, only a vague chorus of contemptible townspeople. "There's no one left to punish me," says Lavinia. "I've got to punish myself."

It is the ultimate of individual arrogance, the final statement of a universe in which society has no part. For O'Neill, since as far back as "The Hairy Ape," there has been only the individual and the universe. The social organism has meant nothing. His Mannons, unlike the Atreides, are not monarchs with a relation to the humanity about them, a humanity that can forgive because it can condemn. They act their crimes on the stage of the infinite. The mention of human law bringing them punishment is startlingly incongruous and it is inevitable that O'Neill, looking for a law, should turn to a divine law.

Forgiveness comes in "Ah, Wilderness!" the satyr-play that follows the tragedy, and it is significant that O'Neill should have interrupted the composition of "Days Without End" to write it. With the religious answer of the more serious play firm in his mind, with its establishment of the divine law, O'Neill can, for the first time, render the sense and feel of common life, can

actually be humorous. Now the family is no longer destructively possessive as he has always represented it, but creatively sympathetic. The revolt of the young son—his devotion to rebels and hedonists, to Shaw, Ibsen and Swinburne—is but the mark of adolescence and in the warm round of forgiving life he will become wisely acquiescent to a world that is not in the least terrible.

But the idyllic life of "Ah, Wilderness!" for all its warmth, is essentially ironical, almost cynical. For it is only when all magnitude has been removed from humanity by the religious answer and placed in the Church and its God that life can be seen as simple and good. The pluses and minuses of man must be made to cancel out as nearly as possible, the equation must be solved to equal nearly zero, before peace may be found. The hero of "Days Without End" has lived for years in a torturing struggle with the rationalistic, questioning "half" of himself which has led him away from piety to atheism, thence to socialism, next to unchastity and finally to the oblique attempt to murder his beloved wife. It is not until he makes an act of submissive faith at the foot of the Cross and thus annihilates the doubting mind, the root of all evil, that he can find peace.

But the annihilation of the questioning mind also annihilates the multitudinous world. "Days Without End," perhaps O'Neill's weakest play, is cold and bleak, life is banished from it by the vision of the Life Eternal. Its religious content is expressed not so much by the hero's priestly uncle, wise, tolerant, humorous in the familiar literary convention of modern Catholicism, as by the hero's wife, a humorless, puritanical woman who lives on the pietistic-romantic love she bears her husband and on her sordid ideal of his absolute chastity. She is the very embodiment of all the warping, bullying idealism that O'Neill had once attacked. Now, however, he gives credence to this plaster saintliness, for it represents for him the spiritual life of absolutes. Now for the first time he is explicit in his rejection of all merely human bulwarks against the pain and confusion of life—finds in the attack upon capitalism almost an attack upon God, scorns socialism and is disgusted with the weakness of those who are disgusted with social individualism. The peace of the absolute can be bought only at the cost of blindness to the actual.

The philosophic position would seem to be a final one. O'Neill has crept into the dark womb of Mother Church and pulled the universe in with him. Perhaps the very violence of the gesture with which he has taken the position of passivity should remind us of his force and of what such force may yet do even in that static and simple dark. Yet it is scarcely a likely place for O'Neill to remember Dion Anthony's warning "It isn't enough to be [life's] creature. You've got to create her or she requests you to destroy yourself" /179/

## STEPS TOWARD REVIVAL: 1946 – 1956

Before the end of World War II, O'Neill sold his mansion in California and in 1945 moved back to the East, where he was to live out the brief remainder of his life. His return to New York and the accompanying announcement that a new play would be produced in the 1946–1947 season aroused a great flurry of interest, especially when O'Neill held the first and only formal press conference of his entire career in 1946. Reporters found him gaunt, considerably aged, an obviously ill man, but all were aware that he still possessed the fascinating mystical magnetism that had been a consistent part of his character, reflected in his penetrating eyes and in his expression—that of a man who had looked into hell and then returned.

The production of *The Iceman Cometh* was hailed as the long-awaited return of O'Neill to active participation in the commercial theatre. Renewed hope arose that many of the plays reported under way during the previous ten years might now be produced. The hope, however, proved premature, the single new production, abortive. Critical reaction was mixed, and *The Iceman Cometh* closed after a modest run. Then, to further the disappointment, the second play, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, foundered on the road in the face of negative reaction from tryout viewers plus bigoted police censorship and personality problems among the cast. The play was withdrawn, but shortly before his death O'Neill published it with an almost pathetic apology for its unpolished condition.

In 1950 another flurry was created by the publication of *Lost Plays of Eugene O'Neill*. New Fathoms Press brought forth a book that contained five of O'Neill's very earliest plays, discovered in manuscript in the Library of Congress. O'Neill had completely forgotten that the plays still existed and had never renewed the copyrights, so they reverted to the public domain. He opposed the publication and for a short while considered bringing suit to prevent it but abandoned the idea in view of the hopelessness of winning such a case. The venture was widely deplored, mainly because of the viola-

tion of O'Neill's wishes but also because the plays failed to make any contribution to American dramatic literature or to O'Neill's own reputation.

A brief but again unsuccessful O'Neill revival took place in 1952 with *Anna Christie* and *Desire Under the Elms*. Both productions received high praise from New York critics but poor public support. Then, for another four years, silence.

Meanwhile, O'Neill was living out his last tragic years in isolation in Marblehead, Massachusetts, New York City, and Boston, afflicted with a series of illnesses and injuries, estrangement from his wife, and a final attack of bronchial pneumonia in November 1953. His death on November 27 received only scattered notice outside the pages of newspaper drama and book review sections, and his passing from the scene was almost completely ignored thereafter. A few major critics expressed shock at the way in which he had been permitted to disappear from the earth in almost complete silence, unnoted and unmourned, and for a short while it seemed that the one great giant of our dramatic literature would remain known only in a few textbooks and in the memories of a dying theatre generation. His name evoked little response among the new crop of playgoers and actors.

Then, suddenly, Eugene O'Neill was once more, even after death, a vital force in American drama. The newly formed off-Broadway company, The Circle in the Square, producing its low-budget plays in a crowded former Greenwich Village night club, staged a full-length revival of *The Iceman Cometh*. In new surroundings, with an intimate audience of less than two hundred, the play was an immediate success. It was universally praised and became, in length of run, the most successful O'Neill play yet staged. In the meantime, the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, Sweden, had received Mrs. O'Neill's permission to produce *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which was originally to be withheld until twenty-five years after the author's death. Its impact was electric, and when it was published in this country, there was a strong demand for its immediate New York production. Impressed by José Quintero's skill with *The Iceman Cometh*, Mrs. O'Neill permitted him to direct the play, and in November 1956 New York witnessed the first new O'Neill play in ten years and the first successful O'Neill opening on Broadway since *Ah, Wilderness!* more than twenty years before.

## THE PLAYS OF 1946 – 1956

### Written:

#### 1952

*A Moon for the Misbegotten* (Composition date is uncertain, but 1952 marks first publication date.)

#### 1955

*Long Day's Journey Into Night*

***First Performances:***

**1946**

*The Iceman Cometh* October 9, Martin Beck Theatre

**1947**

*A Moon for the Misbegotten* February 20, Hartman Theatre, Columbus, Ohio

**1956**

*Long Day's Journey Into Night* November 7, Helen Hayes Theatre

REVIEWS

***The Iceman Cometh***

*Brooks Atkinson*

Mr O'Neill has written one of his best plays Dipping back in his memory thirty-four years, reaching down to the tatterdemalions of a mouldy bar-room, he has come up with a dark and somber play that compares with the best work of his earliest period "The Iceman Cometh," he calls it to no one's satisfaction but his own, and it was acted with rare insight and vitality at the Martin Beck last evening Writing it for a performance that lasts more than four hours is a sin that rests between Mr O'Neill and his Maker Long plays have become nothing more than a bad label with our first dramatist.

But if that is the way Mr O'Neill wants to afflict harmless playgoers, let us accept our fate with nothing more than a polite demur. For the only thing that matters is that he has plunged again into the black quagmire of man's illusions and composed a rigadon of death as strange and elemental as his first works. Taking his characters again out of the lower depths, as he did in the "S. S. Glencairn" series, he is looking them over with bleak and mature introspection. And like all his best work, this one is preeminently actable. The Theatre Guild performance, under Eddie Dowling's direction, is a masterpiece of tones, rhythms and illumination.

The whisky-ridden derelicts who drag their broken carcasses through Harry Hope's bar came out of O'Neill's youth when he, too, was drinking too much and dreaming of becoming a writer They are men whose only lives are illusions—"pipe dreams," O'Neill calls their memories which they foolishly translate into hopes for a future that will never exist When the play opens they are happily living together in a spirit of human rancor, broken, tired and drunken but buoyed up by romantic illusions about themselves

What shatters their stupor is the arrival of an old comrade who has reformed. He has found peace at last, he says. He does not need whisky any more, he says, because he has purged himself of illusions and knows the full truth of himself Instead of making them happy, however, his reform movement destroys their decaying contentment Without illusions, they find them-

selves standing alone and terrified. They cannot face the hollowness of themselves without the opium of illusions. But they are released in the last act by the awful discovery that their teacher has freed himself from illusions by committing a crime that will sit him in the electric chair. He is free from illusions because he has resigned from life and is already dead in spirit. Whereupon, the derelicts drink up again and happily relapse into the stupor of the bottle.

That is the abstract story of "The Iceman Cometh." But the concrete drama on the stage is infinitely more flavorsome. Among its battered wretches it includes a raffish lot of social outcasts in amazing variety—an I. W. W. emigré, a broken gambler, a cop who was thrown off the force, a British infantry officer who stole regimental funds, a Boer commando leader who showed the white feather, the well-educated son of an embezzler, some prostitutes and barkeepers. The Lord knows they talk too much, for Mr. O'Neill insists on grinding their bitterness into very small and precise pieces. But it is good talk—racy, angry, comic drumbeats on the lid of doom, and a strong undercurrent of elemental drama silently washes the gloomy charnel-house where they sit waiting.

Surely it is no accident that most of Mr. O'Neill's plays act well. Although he seems on the surface to be a literal writer, interminably fussing over minor details, his best plays move across the stage as methodically and resolutely as a heavy battle attack, and over-run strategic points with a kind of lumbering precision. The performance of "The Iceman Cometh" ranks among the theatre's finest works. To house these rags and tags of the human race, Robert Edmond Jones has created a mean and dingy last refuge that nevertheless glows with an articulate meaning, like a Daumier print, as one alert spectator observed.

To anyone who loves acting, Dudley Digges' performance as the tottering and irascible saloon proprietor is worth particular cherishing. Although the old man is half dead, Mr. Digges' command of the actor's art of expressing character and theme is brilliantly alive; it overflows with comic and philosophical expression. As the messenger of peace, James Barton is also superb—common, unctuous, cheerful and fanatical, and Mr. Barton reads one of the longest speeches on record without letting it drift off into sing-song or monotony.

As the barroom's master of cosmic thinking, Carl Benton Reid is vigorously incisive, and lends substance to the entire performance. Nicholas Joy is giving the best performance of his career as the unfrocked captain. As the garrulous night bartender, Tom Pedi with his querulous vitality streaks an amusing ribbon of color throughout the drama. There are also notable performances by John Marriott, as the discredited gambler, Paul Crabtree, as an I. W. W. traitor, and E. G. Marshall, as a fallen Harvard man.

If there were any justice in the world, all the actors would get a line of applause here. But this bulletin, like Mr. O'Neill's play, is already much too garrulous. Let us cut it short with one final salute to a notable drama by a man who writes with the heart and wonder of a poet.



***The Iceman Cometh****Robert Coleman*

With the theatre suffering from a case of pernicious anemia, Dr Eugene O'Neill, after a 12-year absence, left retirement last evening to give it a stimulating, revivifying shot in the arm called "The Iceman Cometh"

O'Neill's Iceman is a sort of Janus, one side being a peripatetic philanthropist and the other death. He argues that most men live on illusion, on dreams of a brighter tomorrow, and when their illusions are shattered death arrives.

"The Iceman Cometh" is set in Harry's bar, circa 1912. Between Greenwich Village and the Hudson, it is a refuge for bums, tarts, radicals, adventurers and seamen. Harry, the host, does not press the guests when they get behind with the rent and he's fairly generous with his red-eye.

The annual event to which the regulars look forward is the coming of Hickey, a hardware salesman, for a toot. He always brings a big bankroll and the drinks are on him while the dough lasts. But Hickey's last visit proves disturbing.

He offers drinks to those who want 'em, but won't touch the stuff himself. He's found peace and doesn't need it any longer. And he tries to help his cronies find peace by shedding their illusions by facing tomorrow today. All because he has murdered his wife to destroy her illusions that he will turn out a decent husband if she waits long enough.

After nerve-racking experiences with Hickey's panacea, most of the bums go back to their illusions and Harry's lousy booze, but the Iceman gets a couple who can't recapture the ability to dream.

The Theatre Guild has given the fascinating O'Neill script a fine production. The cast includes James Barton, Dudley Digges, Nicholas Joy, Carl Benton Reid, Morton L. Stevens, Tom Pedi, Al McGranary, E. G. Marshall, John Marriott, Frank Twedell, Russell Collins, Paul Crabtree, Leo Chazell, Joe Marr, Ruth Gilbert, Jeanne Cagney and Marcella Markham.

They are perfect types and give such perfect performances under Eddie Dowling's direction that it smacks of the ungracious to single out individuals for especial salutes.

Robert Edmond Jones has contributed a setting so real that it fairly reeks of raw alcohol, perspiration, grime and cheap perfume.

"The Iceman Cometh" is a lengthy play. In four acts, it is given at matinee and evening performances. It is like seeing "The Deluge," "The Wild Duck," "The Time of Your Life" and reading Gautier's treatise on Bovaryism in two sittings. You really get your money's worth.

It's great to have O'Neill back with us. He loves theatre as much as he loves life. He is theatre at its finest. And though he is often garrulous—like life—and has an aversion for the editor's pencil, he is continuously absorbing.

Take our advice Rush to the Martin Beck immediately "The Iceman Cometh" will be a terrific hit, the "top ticket" at the brokers Get your pasteboards now—or else.

### ***The Iceman Cometh***

*Eric Bentley*

Europe's loss, in the past decade, has very often been our gain, and in the new post-war era New York *could* become the center of artistic theater in the Western world. Whether it *will* become so depends on the talent it discovers, native and foreign, and the encouragement it gives to the discoveries

Of our native talents in playwriting the most remarkable so far is that of Eugene O'Neill I suggest 1915 as the birthday of American drama because in that year the Provincetown Theatre, Mr O'Neill's first professional home, was founded. Between the First World War and 1934, Mr O'Neill had many plays produced They won him the Nobel Prize (not to mention Pulitzers) and established him as the best American playwright. Then the stream stopped Not for a dozen years has a new O'Neill play been released Hence one's pressing curiosity about *The Iceman Cometh*, which will be on Broadway by the time this article appears. I ask the forbearance of those readers who have seen it, what follows is an impression of the script.

~~Mr. O'Neill has two stories to tell—or two situations to reveal,—and I had better give some notion of both~~ The first story is about a "hardware drummer" nicknamed Hickey who periodically goes on a spree and afterwards is always forgiven by his wife even though after one of his jaunts he gives her syphilis The forgiveness and the wife's pipe dream that he will reform get on Hickey's nerves At last, before going on the spree that is held annually on his friend Harry's birthday, Hickey decides to get his wife off his conscience by killing her To the corpse he says: "Well, you know what you can do with your pipe dream now, you damned bitch!"

✓ The second story is about a woman named Parritt who believes in freedom and becomes a leading Anarchist on the West Coast. Her little son grows up to hate her because he objects to the fact that "she just had to keep on having lovers to prove to herself how free she was " He also notes that although she is devoted to the *idea* of freedom she is herself a tyrant Resentment grows in him to the point where he gives away his mother and the Anarchist gang to the police, though he knows his mother can't last long in jail. Thinking of her fate he says to himself: "You know what you can do with your freedom pipe dream, don't you, you damned old whore?"

~~What does O'Neill make of this material?~~ The first act opens soon after Hickey's murder and young Parritt's betrayal. The fourth and last act closes with Parritt's suicide and Hickey's giving himself up to the police. Through-

out the play the scene is laid in a New York backroom and bar in 1912. In this setting Mr. O'Neill assembles a group of down-and-outs who for the most part have abandoned their various callings for drink and dreams. The bar is symbolic —

It's Bedrock Bar, the End of the Line Café, the Bottom of the Sea Rathskeller, the Last Harbor! No one here has to worry about where they're going next because there is no farther they can go. It's a great comfort to them. Although even here they keep up the appearances of life with a few harmless pipe dreams about their yesterdays and tomorrows.

These pipe dreams are the subject of the play. If you were to ask why the inmates of Harry's bar don't shoot themselves, the answer is that each of them is fooling himself with a comforting illusion about his past and future. There are two scarred relics of the Boer War who dream of going back to England and Africa respectively. An ex-policeman, discharged for graft, dreams of returning to the "force." One character is actually nicknamed Jimmy Tomorrow. The landlord is called Harry Hope. His hope is to return to Tammany, but he has not left the Last Harbor for twenty years.

Human wrecks, then, kept afloat only by pipe dreams, form a kind of choral setting for the story of Hickey and Parritt. And there is a third main character—the man whom Parritt's mother would presumably have married, had not marriage been against her principles, Larry Slade, another wreck, a spectator "in the grandstand" of life. Having washed his hands of the Anarchist Movement, Larry regards himself as the one man without a pipe dream. <sup>64</sup> He remains alive because he is afraid of the alternative.

O'Neill tells his story in the manner made famous by Ibsen: the crucial events having taken place before the curtain rises, he lets them leak out so slowly that we are still discovering some of them in the last act. Up to the end of Act II the audience knows nothing against Hickey. It sees in him a reformed drunk who seems to have got religion. He spends his time asking everyone to share the peace in his heart, which, he says, they can do by giving up their pipe dreams and being true to themselves. But the Ibsenite "leakage" occurs with equal regularity. Act II ends with the announcement that Hickey's wife is dead, Act III that she was killed, Act IV that Hickey himself is the murderer.

During the first three quarters of the play we seem to be witnessing a call to a change of heart, with Hickey as the preacher and repentant sinner. His preaching, moreover, has some effect. The lost souls of Harry's bar start shaking off their illusions and trying to live again. They make their arrangements to leave and take up their lives where they left off. Harry himself actually struggles out into the street to prove that he can face the outer world. But before we can tell how far Hickey's evangelical campaign might go, the collapse comes. Hickey's remarks about his wife's death have aroused suspicion, and he is compelled to tell the whole story.

Now apparently he wouldn't have minded revealing the facts very much,

for he has called the police and is fully prepared for his fate, except for the fact that more truth comes blunting out of his mouth than he had intended—more, indeed, than he knew to be there. Hickey has been fooling himself all this time that he killed his wife for her own sake and out of pure love. He now finds himself saying that he resented her pipe dream and that he killed her for his own sake and out of pure hatred. Agonized, he tries to disclaim the thought. If he *really* had said, “You know what you can do with your pipe dream now” must he not have been mad? He appeals to Harry and the gang, who gladly accept the notion that Hickey has been mad all along. Hickey sees how utterly his attempt to redeem the gang has failed. “It was a waste of time coming here.” He is led off—to the chair or, more likely, to the madhouse. The gang gives up its plans for reformation and goes back to the bottle.

The story of young Parritt is laid side by side with that of Hickey, for his crime is the same and yet different—the same in being motivated by hatred, different in that Parritt could not pretend he acted out of either love or insanity, different too in that his mother was not peacefully dead but enduring a living death, there was nothing Parritt could give himself up to the police for.

Mr. O'Neill brings his main characters together and preserves the unities of time and place by having Parritt, driven by guilt, seek out his mother's former lover, Larry Slade. The “leakage” of Larry's story is as symmetrical as that of Hickey's. In Act I we learn that a stool pigeon has landed Parritt's mother in jail. In Act II we discover that the stool pigeon is Parritt himself, but we are given the false reason that he acted from patriotic motives. In Act III another false reason is provided—that Parritt wanted the money offered as reward. In Act IV when Hickey reaches the end of his narrative with the words “So I killed her,” Parritt “suddenly gives up and relaxes limply,” saying—

I may as well confess, Larry. There's no use lying any more.  
You know, anyway. I didn't give a damn about the money. It was  
because I hated her.

Throughout the play Larry has feigned indifference to Parritt and his story, but it becomes more and more obvious that he has never lost his affection for the mother. Hickey wears down the resistance of both Larry and Parritt, and when, at Hickey's downfall, Larry at last tells Parritt to kill himself, the latter, who has been hankering for punishment all along, throws himself down from the fire escape.

Thus two of the main characters are disposed of. Larry, the third, remains. How long he will remain is doubtful, since he is the one person who is fundamentally changed by all that has happened. Although he still does not want to live, he is no longer afraid to die. “By God, I'm the only real convert Hickey made here. From the bottom of my coward's heart I mean that now!” The final stage direction reads: “Larry stares in front of him, oblivious to all their racket.”

What does the play mean? When the audience gets up at the end of Act II it may well think it is in for another *Days Without End*. (This last play of O'Neill's ended with religious salvation.) But O'Neill has been pulling the wool over our eyes. His preacher is a murderer. This foe of pipe dreams is the victim of the most terrible pipe dream revealed in the whole play: the dream that he killed in a spirit of love. And so his gospel turns to ashes in the mouth. Larry, the man without a pipe dream, is no savior either. To be true to himself means in his case turning from cynicism to—death. The Iceman is death, of course. Hickey always used to say in jest that his wife was in the hay with the iceman. And in the end he made sure that she was. The Iceman assuredly earns his place in the title of the play.

It has been said that O'Neill's plays do not "mean anything," that they simply present a picture of life. Certainly the most striking thing in *The Iceman Cometh* is the strange light that is thrown on human nature by Hickey's evangelical episode. The upshot is bad (some critics will call the play pessimistic), yet it is not what Hickey preached that is questioned but his right to preach it. Hickey himself sees this at the end when he advises Harry not to believe that he has been mad all along, for this belief will /65/ turn into another pipe dream, another excuse for relapsing into inactivity.

Pessimistic or not, the play involves a system of thought, the same one, in fact, that has underlain all O'Neill's plays. O'Neill's formula (for perhaps it is less a system than a formula) is: all good forces are those of love and life, all bad forces are those of hate and death. Like *Strange Interlude* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh* portrays only the forces of hate and death. But the Hickey episode shows in a weird way that the opposite forces lie slumbering beneath the surface. Could they be quickened into motion by someone with no pipe dream like Hickey's and no death wish like Larry's? Mr. O'Neill does not pose this question. But obviously his play does "mean something." It means several things. And those who have followed O'Neill's account of human aspirations and attachments, horizons and roots, from his earliest plays on will have no difficulty in finding the principal meanings. Those who come newly to the dramatist I advise to listen to Hickey, for, whatever his behavior and his motive, his gospel of love and life is O'Neill's own.

How good a play is *The Iceman*? As an experience in the theater it is likely to be less "terrific" than the *Interlude* or *Electra*; yet I find it a more interesting play. To everyone except O'Neill-worshippers the two earlier colossi seemed contrived, labored, overloaded, and at times false. It was not that there was too much Freud but that there was too much ham melodrama. Though such roles as Nina and Lavinia have a sound and fury that must impress every actress and every theatergoer, the new play is the cooler, the steadier, and on the whole the better, for their absence. The two women whose lives have much to do with *The Iceman* are dead before the first act opens. All the chief roles are male. This fact, the low-life setting,

and the slangy vernacular of the dialogue give us an atmosphere quite unlike that of O'Neill's other "big" plays, though not so unlike that of his earlier pieces in which, as here, a remarkable working union was effected between naturalism and symbolism

New and old also is his use of Ibsen's analytic exposition—*Emperor Jones* was an early exploitation of it. New and old is the political-social motif. As in *The Hairy Ape*, Mr. O'Neill's approach to society and politics is neither sociological nor political. Politics provide a background for a "timeless" theme, thus annoying the Marxists who look in vain through O'Neill's works for a social message. Nevertheless, the political disillusionment of Larry Slade and young Parritt, not to mention one of the minor characters who is a hostile portrait of a power-mad radical, will mean something to a generation that knows Arthur Koestler and George Orwell.

*The Iceman Cometh*, for all its length, is not an "experimental" play. The masks of *The Great God Brown* and *Lazarus Laughed*, the double appearance of John Loving in *Days Without End*, the allusions to Greek myth in *Electra*, the asides of the *Interlude*—all these seem to have been experimental not in the true sense of being part of a process of discovery and development but in the cheap sense of being freakishly unorthodox. None of these devices is used in the new play. Yet one thing about *The Iceman* is of technical interest.

I allude to the effect of the Ibsen technic, to the concealment from the audience of the play's starting point—the fact that Hickey has killed his wife and the fact that he too has his pipe dream. Of course the modern audience, inured to the thriller, is used to histrionic concealment. And, as a thriller, the value of *The Iceman* is not impaired by mystery so long undisputed. On the melodramatic level, this play like all of O'Neill's, is grandly successful.

But what of its interpretation of life? Is the theme as impressive as it is simple? Is it perfectly presented? Many theorists of the drama have questioned the advisability, in a matter of dramatic irony, of keeping the audience as well as the characters in the dark. Their objection seems germane here. What is gained by keeping us in the dark except as added mysteriousness of atmosphere? Mr. O'Neill might claim that his intention was to let a wrong view settle gradually in the mind and then to drive it out with a sudden dramatic shock. But, in the first place, the shock is so sudden and laconic, the preparation so slow and loquacious, that an audience might well be bewildered rather than enlightened. In the second place, very much is lost by the delay. Not knowing what Hickey really is, we are in no position to appreciate the irony of his evangelical efforts while they are in progress. Possibly Mr. O'Neill has damaged his drama to save his melodrama.

Over twenty years ago the poet-playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal complained that there was something labored, ponderous, and crude about Mr. O'Neill's plays. He found the dramatic repetitions so numerous that they canceled each other out—a point not without relevance to *The Iceman*, which is hampered with too many exact symmetries—character balanced against character, plot against plot, Act against Act. Since most of the

characters are rather wooden and diagrammatic—the whores are stage whores, and so on—since the raciness of the speeches is the raciness of Broadway convention rather than that of great realistic dialogue, we have the impression less of fine dramatic form—which is so to say, organic—than of a skeleton's rigidity. Of course there is much emotion in the play. But you cannot pass off a skeleton as a man merely by enveloping it in a cloud of emotion.

These are rough words. I should make it clear also that I am judging Mr. O'Neill, as he deserves to be judged, by standards far above those of Broadway. If we were to follow the critics' formula, "*The Iceman Cometh* is the best American play since  $x$ ," then  $x$  could only be some earlier play of Mr. O'Neill's. The present season will show how he holds his own against such European playwrights as Sartre, Camus, and Brecht. /66/

### ***Anna Christie***

*Brooks Atkinson*

Although "*Anna Christie*" is not the best of Eugene O'Neill's plays, it is better than most of the plays that turn up on Broadway, and it outranks any of the new plays of this season. Fortunately, it is also just right for a City Center season. And the performance that opened at the Center last evening is a first-rate piece of work with Celeste Holm, Art Smith and Kevin McCarthy in fine fettle in the leading parts.

When Mr. O'Neill wrote "*Anna Christie*" in 1920 he was still under the pungent spell of the S. S. Glencarn mariners, and his sense of tragedy was not thoroughly formed. There is something about the conclusion of "*Anna Christie*" that is not so thoroughly resolved as "*Desire Under the Elms*."

But his nearness to the sea plays in 1920 made it possible for him to create tumultuous, elemental characters whose problems are unsophisticated and whose suffering is fierce. The amiable, stupid barge-captain, the prostitute and the braggart stoker might be hackneyed characters in other hands, and the fog-shrouded coal barge might be a casually romantic vessel.

But Mr. O'Neill's characters, who made such an impression on the theatre thirty-one years ago, are as honest as they are dramatic. Ignorant and helpless, they are cursed with wrong-headed obsessions, and they batter their heads wildly against barriers they set up for themselves.

The ending of "*Anna Christie*" is a happy one, at least from the technical point of view. But you know that for the rest of their lives Chris Christopherson, the ancient child of the sea; Anna, his daughter, and Mat, the stoker, will be stumbling through one stupid crisis after another, full of pain and protest, and always out of control. Every scene and line in "*Anna Christie*" is packed with vitality, and saturated in the sea.

Under Michael Gordon's alert and perceptive direction, the performance

is as vital as the characters Miss Holm, always an able and intelligent actress, makes something candid and coherent out of the part of Anna Pauline Lord brought something uniquely uncertain and compassionate to the original performance, and she gave the whole of "Anna Christie" a depth that is lacking now. But Miss Lord's style was wholly personal Miss Holm's attitude is more direct and more contemporary, but it makes for the tension in the play

Mr McCarthy's wild, lunging, rattle-headed stoker has enormous range and force and puts a lot of fire into the performance. As the aging barge-skipper, Art Smith has created a fascinating and logical character who is all humanity in his sentimentality, his confusion and his weaknesses As the skipper's current woman, Grace Valentine gives a comic performance that translates a minor character into something both valid and delightful

As further evidence of the City Center's growing mastery of its job, pay a little attention to Emeline Roche's terse but inviting settings that translate frowzy material into dramatic designs "Anna Christie" is part of the American theatre's heritage It is good to have it recognized now in an invigorating performance

### ***Desire Under the Elms***

*Brooks Atkinson*

When the final accounts are tallied, "Desire Under the Elms," may turn out to be the greatest play written by an American To a theatregoer who has just come from the Anta Playhouse, Mr O'Neill's harsh tragedy of New England is not something to feel temperate about For it has the headlong strength of a major creation. It has more size than the life it literally portrays, and it has also the shattering impact of a thunderbolt

Let's be grateful for the stirring performance that opened at the Anta Playhouse last evening as the first of this season's series. Mordecai Gorelik has provided an austere setting with grimly poetic overtones Harold Clurman, who has stature enough as a director to revere stature in a dramatist, has organized a tight and tumultuous performance that is not afraid of bold scenes

People who remember the original performance in 1924 may quibble about this one a little It is not hard enough all the way through Karl Malden's old man Cabot is too loose-jointed for so heroic a patriarch, and Douglas Watson's Eben is too genteel. But those comments are perhaps supercilious in view of the fact that the performance as a whole plucks out the soul of Mr O'Neill's mystic tragedy.

And there is no doubt at all that Carol Stone's Abbie is a stunning piece of work You may not have visualized her in advance as a rapacious and passionate woman on a New England farm But she has the strength and the insight to play it superbly. It is Miss Stone who first drives the iron into the



performance and makes "Desire Under the Elms" come wholly to life as an ode to greed and lust and murder without remorse. Once she enters those New England catacombs, Mr. O'Neill's play becomes overwhelming. She and Mr. Watson play their scenes together with recklessness and fire, and also with theatre.

For Mr. O'Neill is basically a theatre writer. This story of rapacious people whose love and hate are practically identical could not be told in any other form of literature. Even the dialogue, which seems to be lacking in literary grace, has rude power in the theatre. It looks clumsy in print. But in the theatre it goes bluntly to the heart of the wild things Mr. O'Neill is writing about.

Mr. O'Neill forces his story so ferociously that it is on the verge of melodrama all the way through. The ownership paper, the money bag concealed in the floor, the weird courtship in the parlor sealed off for funerals, the orgiastic party celebrating the birth of the baby, the murder of the baby, and the arrival of the sheriff's party—these things intrinsically are close to hokum.

But Mr. O'Neill has subordinated them to his great theme of the fury of nature. He has written them with so much conviction that they are symbols of doom in a terrific tragedy of men in the grip of forces they cannot master. The materials of "Desire Under the Elms" are primitive. But the whole play has the grand design of a masterpiece.

Thanks for a magnificent evening in the theatre

### ***The Iceman Cometh***

*Richard Watts, Jr*

The Circle in the Square put us all in its debt yesterday by opening a revival of Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," and it is a pleasure and an honor to see it again, particularly in so sound a production as Jose Quintero has staged. Of course, "The Iceman" is too long. It is also repetitious and inclined to be elephantine in its tread, and it is certainly not intended for casual playgoing. But it is a work of titanic power, one of the authentic masterpieces of the modern theater, and quite possibly the finest drama ever written by America's most distinguished playwright.

It was 10 years ago that the Theater Guild first offered this mastodonic drama, and while there were a lot of people who didn't like it then, I doubt if anyone who saw it will ever forget its tremendous impact. O'Neill wrote it with no concern for brevity. He piled detail upon detail and speech upon speech, and he seemed to introduce enough characters for several plays. There are times when even his most ardent enthusiasts were left a little exhausted. But the point is that he did achieve a brooding intensity of spirit that is often not far from overwhelming.

In those days, there was a tendency to compare it to Gorky, since its

people are the doomed misfits of the earth and its setting a saloon and lodging house of the lowest degree. Now the comparison is likely to be "Waiting for Godot," because it deals with lost mankind's search for dreams and illusions. Indeed, it may be said that "The Iceman Cometh" shows sardonically what happens when Godot arrives, for Hickey, the salesman whose coming is so eagerly awaited by O'Neill's exiles, does get there, and brings, not happiness, but the destruction of their dreams.

It was said by those who bitterly disliked "The Iceman" that its defeatist message was "Stay drunk and keep your illusions." This strikes me as a most superficial description of what the drama has to say. It is true that the O'Neill misfits lose what solace they find in life when Hickey tells them they must face reality and sobers them up, and are happy again only when they return to their alcoholic illusions. But I think all O'Neill is saying is that some sort of illusions are necessary in a bleak world and that men are lost without them, whatever they may be.

This may be a dark and terrible philosophy, since O'Neill was a man of somber spirit and tragic sense of life, but "The Iceman" is not basically a thesis play. What is important is that it is the work of a superb dramatist, with deep insight into the human heart, a vivid and compassionate understanding of character, and rare emotional and theatrical power, and that the play shows all of his qualities, including his brooding poetic sense and his occasional flashes of humor, at their peak. Just as a rueful dramatization of the joys and sorrows of the world's misfits, it is unforgettable.

He also wrote magnificent acting roles. No one who saw the late Dudley Digges as Harry Hope, the saloon owner, in the first production will ever forget him, but Farrell Pelly plays the role admirably. Jason Robards Jr., in the difficult part of Hickey, gives a brilliant performance, far better than the original portrayal of this all-important characterization. In addition, there is especially good work by Addison Powell, William Edmonson, Richard Bowler, James Greene, Conrad Bain, Paul Andor, Peter Falk, Joe Marr and Dolly Jonah. "The Iceman Cometh" remains a monumental drama.

### ***Long Day's Journey Into Night***

*John Chapman*

Let us now forget something that everybody knows by now, that Eugene O'Neill's "Long Day's Journey Into Night" is about himself, his parents and his brother. This is a mere detail, for the drama could have been written and very possibly was written about anybody else. The news this morning is that "Long Day's Journey Into Night" is a magnificent work, and last evening it was given a magnificent performance by Florence Eldridge, Fredric March, Jason Robards and Bradford Dillman. It exploded like a dazzling skyrocket over the humdrum of Broadway theatricals.

This is O'Neill's most beautiful play—perhaps the only beautiful one he ever wrote. And it is one of the great dramas of any time. In one speech, the tubercular young man who is supposed to be O'Neill declines to be cheered when he is told that he has the makings of a poet. He answers that he is like a bum who has asked for a cigaret: he doesn't have the makings but only the habit. In this, his next-to-last play, O'Neill, who so often yearned beyond his reach, became a poet.

It is a long play, running about three and a half hours, and one's attention may wander for a minute here and there. But the attention will not wander for long, because the profound compassion of the writing and the superb brightness of the acting cannot long be ignored.

✓A summary of the plot seems dismal enough to discourage all but the bravest playgoers from venturing into the Helen Hayes Theatre. There are a father and mother and two sons. The father, a noted actor, is a drunk and a miser. The mother is a sweet dope fiend. The elder brother is a cynical sot and the younger one is a sick and troubled boy.

It is this younger son who says, "If you don't make allowances in this family you'll go nuts." And it is these allowances—the allowances O'Neill made out of the great depths of his sympathy—which make "Long Day's Journey Into Night" the great cleansing emotional experience that it is.

One by one, the four people in this family try gropingly to explain how and why they became the way they are. Says one of them: "The things life has done to us we cannot excuse or explain. The past is the present. It's the future, too." All have been caught in a destiny they cannot alter.

As they tell of themselves, each in a long monologue, these people become larger than their own small lives, they become humanity, looking for something but not knowing exactly what it is looking for. They are magnificent.

And the performances, under the direction of Jose Quintero, are magnificent. Miss Eldridge reaches stunning heights in the art of acting, and so do March as her actor-husband, Robards as their hopeless and drunken son, and Dillman, the sick one with the touch of the poet in him—who is, of course, the young O'Neill who had only begun to write.

Last evening at the Helen Hayes was a great evening for the American theatre, and the first-night audience was spellbound and enraptured.

### ***Long Day's Journey Into Night.***

*Thomas R. Dash*

In "Long Day's Journey Into Night," presented last night at the Helen Hayes Theatre by the same group that is reviving "The Iceman Cometh" downtown, Eugene O'Neill has written a family testament, an autobiographical and pitiless exposure of the heartbreak house in which he was brought up and conditioned during his youth.

In the revelation that his father, a famed and grandiloquent matinee idol, was a niggardly miser, that his mother was an incorrigible drug addict, that his older brother was a dissolute drunkard, and that he himself was a consumptive, your esteem for all the past works of the Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize playwright must arise. It took courage and genius to overcome so bleak and destitute an environment.

Just as your esteem rises for the over-all career and contributions of O'Neill to the world's dramatic literature, it must fall somewhat in examining his last document. For to be utterly honest, "*Long Day's Journey Into Night*," while savagely incisive and harrowing as a study of an embittered family, is a play that will not rank with "*Mourning Becomes Electra*," "*Strange Interlude*" and some of the dramatist's other epic plays.

Perhaps it is the very nature of the work that precludes trenchant and compact crescendos, and that prevents it from evoking the feeling of catharsis or exaltation in the manner of the great Greek tragedies.

O'Neill is writing of his own family and every time one of the characters flays the other, or causes a scar, he or she penitently softens the sting by begging to be forgiven. This continuous interplay of wounding and healing, of rancor and affection reveals O'Neill's compassion and understanding for his mother and father and brother, but it detracts from the tensions that are inherent in the play and that are developed only in the final of four marathon acts.

Structurally the play is loose and often dismays the auditor with its tendency toward repeating and elaborating salient facts already established. Between a number of the greatest scenes, and there are some of these, it meanders exasperatingly.

But there is greatness in the writing, too, and flashes of the O'Neill before illness brought his wonderful career to an end. The heart-to-heart talk between the father and younger son, explaining the father's penurious beginnings and the need for parsimony which then became habitual, is one of the most moving in the play.

The confrontation between the two brothers and the mental surgery the older one performs on the younger one's heart in exposing his motivations provides another affecting scene. The Ophelia-like episode when the mother, in a narcotic trance, drags her wedding dress just exhumed from an attic trunk also sends an emotional tremor through an on-looker.

In all the scenes of bickering and recrimination, there is the saving grace of love and affection. But these familial miseries add up to an evening of gloom, which is not saved by any purgative emotional elation.

The performances are splendid. Fredric March as the swaggering, nettling father plays with the flamboyance expected of the matinee idol he is impersonating. He is most effective when he describes his poverty-stricken past and the pathetic death of the potential artist in him after playing one lucrative role for many, many years. Florence Eldridge as the fluttery and neurotic mother reveals maternal affection for her sons, and abiding affection for her husband. In her furtive moments, when she is

trying to hide her torment and drug addiction from the rest, she is truly touching.

Jason Robards, Jr., offers a tremendous study of a degraded guzzler and lusty pursuer of wenches and harlots, and Bradford Dillman evokes the sensitivity and the poetic refinement of the tubercular son, who is the prototype of O'Neill himself. In the role of a young maid of the house, Katherine Ross is pert and attractive.

For the cognoscenti and for devotees of O'Neill, these flagellations and psychological penetrations into the pitiful ruins of a family may prove stimulating. But for the neutral and dispassionate observer and for the rank and file of theatregoers, "A Long Day's Journey Into Night" may prove a long night's journey without too much daylight.

### ***Long Day's Journey Into Night***

*Walter Kerr*

In "Long Day's Journey Into Night" Florence Eldridge plays a shattered mother—her white hair drifting mistily about the damaged prettiness of her face—who has convinced herself, with the help of morphine, that her arthritic hands are the true cause of all her pain. She stretches them out before her in the blurred light of a foggy seaside afternoon and exults "They can't touch me now—I see them, but they're far away! The pain is gone."

This, I think, is what Eugene was doing when he put to paper the searing and sorry record of the wreck of his family. He has held up his mother, father, and his brother at the arm's length of the stage, looked at everything that was ugly and misshapen and destroyed in them, and now the pain is gone.

It is gone, too. Though the four-hour, endlessly savage examination of conscience on the stage of the Helen Hayes is deliberately, masochistically harrowing in the ferocity of its revelation, the agony that O'Neill felt whenever he contemplated his own beginnings is not passed onto his audience. It is in some curious and even exalting manner exorcised, washed away, leaving in its place an undefined dignity, an agreed-upon peace, a powerful sense of exhilarated completion.

"Long Day's Journey" is not a play. It is a lacerating round-robin of recrimination, self-dramatization, lies that deceive no one, confessions that never expiate the crime. Around the whiskey bottles and the tattered leather chairs and the dangling light-cords that infest the decaying summer home of the Tyrones (read O'Neills), a family of ghosts sit in a perpetual game of four-handed solitaire, stir to their feet in a danse macabre that outlines the geography of Hell, place themselves finally on an operating table that allows for no anesthetic. When the light falls they are still—but not saved.

How has O'Neill kept self-pity and vulgarity and cheap bravado out of this prolonged, unasked-for, improbable inferno? Partly by the grim determina-

tion that made him a major dramatist: the insistence that the roaring fire he could build by grinding his own two hands together was the fire of truth. You can disbelieve, but you cannot deny him his heat, his absolute passion.

And partly by a talent he must have picked up from that greedy and grandiose father of his, a talent that puts words together so that actors can chew them, spit them, tear at one another's skins with them. Director Jose Quintero has seen to it that everyone of his present players knows how to handle that whip.

Fredric March cracks down on the skinflint monarch that O'Neill remembered as his father with majestic authority from the outset. Laughing a bit too much and a bit too hollowly, working off his nerves with a restless cigar, snapping every insult like a guilty bulldog, he foreshadows the whole sodden fantasia of the midnight to come. When he reaches that last grim debacle, and is forced to stumble to his feet in a slaving but heart-breaking tribute to his lost glory, he is in every way superb.

Hot on his heels is Jason Robards Jr. as the dissolute elder brother who may have led the consumptive Edmund (read Eugene) into every sort of vice to help square away his own failure. Mr. Robards lurches into the final scene with his hands, his mouth, and his mind wildly out of control, cracks himself in two as he pours out every tasteless truth that is in him, and subsides at last into the boozy sleep of the damned. The passage is magnificent.

Florence Eldridge makes the downward course of an incapable mother utterly intelligible. She does not have the deep, resonant notes that will sustain her woman through the blinding, tragic memories of the center of the play, she cannot quite fight fury with fury. Yet there is a hidden delicacy that is often touching in the shallow gayeties and transparent pretenses of a convent girl who could not survive the world.

Bradford Dillman handles the exceedingly difficult and soul-searching soliloquies of his poet who "didn't have the makings, just the habit" with swift, sensitive skill, and Katherine Ross is excellent in the brief role of "second girl" who is permitted to tittle while her mistress mourns. The David Hays setting is a perfect echo—curving and empty—of the universe these characters wander.

For any one who cares about the American theater, "Long Day's Journey" is, of course, an obligation. But it is more than that. It is a stunning theatrical experience.

#### GENERAL CRITICISM

#### **"*Counsels of Despair*"**

*Anonymous*

Mark Twain, when he was told that the Pilgrim Fathers had landed on Plymouth Rock, fervently wished that Plymouth Rock had landed on the

Pilgrim Fathers. The wine of veneration for these pioneering puritans was even then turning to vinegar, and now there is not a newly naturalized immigrant from the slums of Europe who will do them reverence or refrain from thumbing his nose at them. Yet it was they who made America safe for Mr. Ben Hecht. What a paradox it is that America, where energetic enterprise and undaunted individuality are more highly esteemed than elsewhere, should deride the Pilgrim Fathers and applaud, as its greatest playwright, Mr. Eugene O'Neill, whose whole belief about life contradicts his country's! All his plays are contemptuous of people and denunciatory of human existence, a communion service without a hymn. He has no zest for life—it disgusts him, and he may be described as the last of the Cathari, that singular sect of Christians who loathed life, refused fertility, in principle if not in practice, and gave their greatest admiration to suicide. Larry Slade, in his latest play, *The Iceman Cometh*, is a typical *credens* Cathar—one who professes, but does not practise, the faith in its extreme form. He has no will to live, nor any will to die, and he drifts down to Harry Hope's squalid bar to become one of its dreariest inhabitants, a dismal drunkard who has not the courage of his futile convictions, and can commit suicide only by deputy.

Mr. O'Neill is as puritanical as Mr. Shaw, but his puritanism, unlike Mr. Shaw's, unlike Milton's, unlike Andrew Marvell's, has no grace or geniality. It is sour stuff, and makes a Pilgrim Father, in comparison with Mr. O'Neill, seem a blood relation of Sir Toby Belch. Yet no one denounces Puritans so frequently and so ferociously as Mr. O'Neill, who spits and spews upon their tombs as if they had done him personal injury. A man has only to mention that he is a Methodist minister to receive the entire contents of Mr. O'Neill's vast vials of wrath. The Rev. Hutchins Light, in an incoherent piece, *Dynamo*, catches it severely, and a minister's son, Theodore Hickman, the protagonist of *The Iceman Cometh*, rails against his father as if he were the original owner of horns and hooves. His fury against puritans is so fierce that it appears to be pathological. Hickman, who has been created in the fallacy, refuted by fact, that the children of the clergy generally go to the devil, tells the dreary sots in Hope's bar that his home was "like a jail." If it was, we may well believe that he made it one.

The puritanical Milton was not the first of our poets to say.—

The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.<sup>1</sup>

That roystering Elizabethan, Marlowe, slain in such a "dive" as Harry Hope's, was equally certain that each of us makes his own hell. Mephistopheles, when Faustus inquires where hell is, replies—

Where we are is hell.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Paradise Lost*, 11, 254–255

<sup>2</sup>From *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593), one of the many versions of the Faust legend in which the aged doctor sells himself to the devil (Mephistopheles) for renewed youth.—Ed

And where hell is, there must we ever be Mr O'Neill's drunken "drummer," accusing his father of his own fault, describes a home which in no way, save that of being a minister's, resembles the one so lovingly portrayed by Thomas Lamont in his charming reminiscences, *A Boyhood in a Parsonage*, nor is his description reconcilable with the extraordinary number of great men and women, in America and Great Britain, who were born in rectories and manses Mr. F C S Lowell, in *Munsey's Magazine* for September, 1907, shows that "nearly one in 12 of the Americans who have risen to distinction are clergyman's sons" They include Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes

Our own list is not negligible It contains Addison, Matthew Arnold, Jane Austen, F H. Bradley, the Brontës, John Buchan, Coleridge, Cowper, Crashaw, Cudworth, Drake, Froude, Mrs Gaskell, Goldsmith, J R Green, T. H. Green, Hallam, Warren Hastings, Hobbes, Hazlitt, Jenner, Keble, Charles Kingsley, Marvell, Nelson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Cecil Rhodes, Henry Sidgwick, Tennyson, the Wesleys, Sir David Wilkie, Wolfe, Sir Christopher Wren and several hundred others This nation would be greatly reduced in mental status if our rectories and manses had been barren. Students of the drama who are constrained by earnest teachers in co-educational schools to pore upon the works of Mr O'Neill as if they were the Holy Writ might well wonder how he, the son of devout Irish Roman Catholics, and brought up in a well-found theatrical family, knows anything about clerical homes, where means are usually small, and can assert with so much violent emphasis that they are sinks of iniquity where children are certain to be damned Hickman is the only minister's child who frequents Hope's bar What damned the rest of them to that? We can recall only one man with a load of clerical ancestors, and on both sides too, whose prospects of salvation have been hopelessly, if willingly, compromised: Karl Marx

The question is not idly raised It is strictly germane to Mr O'Neill's philosophy, if, indeed, philosophy is a word which is applicable to the mass of indisciplined emotions and jejune opinions which appear in his plays This Cathar differs from his predecessors, from Manichee<sup>3</sup> to Tolstoy and Ruskin, in a fundamental respect They despaired of this life, he despairs of any All other Cathari, Manicheans, Albigensians<sup>4</sup> and what not, loathed human life because they had a profound faith in a better one, and counted time spent here as wasted The wise Cathar was one who quickly rid himself of humanity so that he might enjoy eternal felicity But Mr O'Neill, the neo-Cathar, has no hope of anything better, here or hereafter. The world is

<sup>3</sup>*Manichee*, a follower of Mani, a Persian sage whose religion, founded in the third century A.D., was called the last of the Gnostics (Gnosticism was a philosophic and religious movement among early Christians who believed in emancipation through knowledge or *gnosis*, knowledge of spiritual things) Manicheans believed in the two "roots" of basic good and basic evil as creative forces (the conflict of light and darkness) — Ed

<sup>4</sup>*Albigensians*, members of a religious sect of southern France in the eleventh century, named for Albi, a town near Toulouse The Albigensians taught the doctrine of the Manicheans concerning the two opposing creative forces of good and evil — Ed



futile and so are its inhabitants. There is no other world, and this one had better be ended. Let us therefore drink ourselves to death if we have not enough courage to blow out our brains. The people who frequent Harry Hope's bar are of different nationalities: American, Afrikaner, English, German, Irish, Italian, Scottish and Negro; but they are all sots and spongers. The only workers among them are the barmen, who are pimps. The three women are prostitutes. That, according to Mr. O'Neill, is mankind. There is nothing here of courage and endurance, nothing of unflinching faith, nothing of self-sacrifice deliberately made. The O'Neill world is a dirty pub, frequented by drunks and disorderlies and shiftless loafers, and periodically raided by corrupt cops.

Into this assembly of despair comes Hickman, the breezy boozier, who visits the bar occasionally for an orgy. But he is now a changed man. He has acquired a belief, and after the fashion of converts, is eager /197/ to proselytize. They must all do what he has done, confront fact, and acknowledge themselves to be what they are. If the pimp will admit that he is a pimp, if the prostitute will confess her occupation, if the sot and sponger will own up . . . then their misery will end. They undergo against their will some sort of conversion, but their regeneration renders them more futile than before; and when they learn that Hickman has solved his problem by murdering his wife, they relapse with relief. The swine return to their swill. They are, Slade asserts, converts to death!

*The Iceman Cometh* is not a brief decline into despair by an idealist who loses heart when he compares people as they are with people as he wishes them to be. Mr. O'Neill is not Shakespeare writing *Timon of Athens*, with *The Tempest* still in his head. The Mr. O'Neill who wrote *Beyond the Horizon* in 1920 is the Mr. O'Neill who wrote *The Iceman Cometh* in 1946, and we must take him with some seriousness, since his countrymen applaud him loudly, calling him their greatest playwright and placing him in august company. He has received the Pulitzer Prize three times. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936, when he was forty-eight; a prize which has been capriciously awarded since 1914. Mr. Shaw had to wait for it until he was sixty-nine. It was withheld from Thomas Hardy and H. G. Wells, but given to Mr. Sinclair Lewis and Mrs. Pearl Buck. Mr. O'Neill's work has now been published and performed in many countries, although it has been less warmly received in Europe, and especially in France, than it has been in America. He is entitled, therefore, to be judged by the highest standards. and since *The Iceman Cometh*, the twenty-ninth of his plays to appear in Great Britain, seems to sum up his beliefs, its publication justifies us in attempting to estimate his rank. Is he, as many of his countrymen assert, of the same stature as Aeschylus and Shakespeare? He himself has not disclaimed the comparison. He has, indeed, insisted on it by using themes they used.

The most obvious difference between Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Mr. O'Neill is that the two former loved mankind, but the last feels only contemptuous pity for it. The strongest passion animating his character is hate.

A Desert Father was not more disdainful of existence than Mr O'Neill, who finds nothing inspiring in the sight of Caliban looking up to the beautiful Miranda. There is no sign of nobility in the characters who populate his plays. Not one of them has been made in the image of God. All of them bear the mark of the beast. The best of them are only negatively good, inertly abstaining from evil as if they were less in love with virtue than terrified of vice. Wandering through his underworld, and holding our noses as we wander, we have difficulty in believing that even it could have existed without one positively good and likeable inhabitant. Nobel, in his will, laid down a law to guide adjudicators in awarding his Prize for Literature. It should be given "to the person who shall have produced in the fields of literature the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency." The word *idealistic* is susceptible of various interpretations. It can be made applicable to Swift, even when he is writing about the Houyhnhnms,<sup>5</sup> but one must stretch and strain it severely to find its applicability to Mr. O'Neill, whose world is a bestiary full of vulpine animals and crushed worms.

His characters are ineffectual egotists, whining for opportunities they are incapable of using. The most virile of them, the sailors and stokers in the early sea-plays, are mindless creatures, clawing and clutching like dying dinosaurs, and those who show some signs of contact with intelligence are impotent. In spite of the difference in their colour and physique, Yank, in *The Hairy Ape*, and Robert Mayo, in *Beyond the Horizon*, and the Negro student, Jim Harris, in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, are closely akin, equally inept and empty. The leading characters in such plays as *The First Man, Welded, The Great God Brown* and *Days Without End*, who may be called "intellectuals," are embarrassingly puerile, causing us to wonder how they managed to keep out of asylums. Marco Polo, in *Marco Millions*, and Juan Ponce de Leon, in *The Fountain*, are fustian figures, as futile and dispiriting as Emma Crosby in *Diff'rent. Man*. Mr. O'Neill invites us to believe, is a puny creature who vainly dreams of high achievements, but is dogged by disaster. The desponding Gael has overpowered Mr. O'Neill; and where there might have been poetic acclamation, there is only shrill and petulant complaint. It was Mommsen<sup>6</sup> who said "the Celts have shaken all states and have founded none." Mr. O'Neill, in his despondent drama of despair, seems eager and ambitious to prove him right.

"Of the thirty-seven O'Neill plays I have seen or read," Mr. Barrett Clark remarks in a hasty survey of them, "there are only five in which there is no murder, death, suicide or insanity. In the others, I find a total of eight suicides and one unsuccessful attempt, twelve important murders (not counting incidental episodes); twenty-six deaths, nearly all due to violence.

<sup>5</sup>Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), English satirist, author of *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver visits the land of the Houyhnhnms (pronounced hwinhims), a Utopia inhabited by very intelligent horses.—Ed

<sup>6</sup>Theodor Mommsen (1817-1903), German classical scholar and historian who possessed a phenomenal knowledge of classical antiquity. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1902 for work on ancient texts and monuments.—Ed

and eight cases of insanity " Mr Clark's calculation was made in 1933 His figures can now be increased<sup>1</sup> Preoccupation with violence, however, is not Mr O'Neill's prime fault An estimate of violent deaths in Shakespeare would make the Newgate Calendar seem pure as undriven snow. At the end of *Hamlet*, the stage is strewn with dead bodies, all of them violently done to death Eight persons in that play are murdered The heroine goes out of her mind and is drowned Even Mr O'Neill has not indulged in so much slaughter in a single work. His supreme defect is his morbidity and feeble despair, his pathological contempt for people Mr Somerset Maugham is not so disdainful of mortal motives as Mr O'Neill, is, indeed, less cruelly, because he is more cynically, contemptuous of them There is greater pity for people in Mr Maugham than in Mr O'Neill, but neither of them seems to have noticed man's nobility, or to have observed his incessant efforts to rise to finer conditions, or to feel the slightest admiration for his courage under adversity Mr O'Neill, indeed, has a perverse and sadistic desire to invert the nobility other men have seen Shakespeare shows us a Caliban lifting up his eyes from the slime in which he flounders to gaze on loveliness and grace, but Mr. O'Neill, in *The Hairy Ape*, finds his Caliban no more than a vicious gorilla, disguised as a man, who is infuriated by the fear and contempt he inspires in a multimillionaire's degenerate daughter His Miranda never meets a Ferdinand who makes her exclaim

O wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,  
That has such people in it.<sup>7</sup>

She is, her aunt declares, "a natural born ghou!" whose dilettante slumming is an excuse for indulging her morbid craving for sensation When she sees Yank, the hairy ape, she faints with horror, murmuring, "Oh, the filthy beast!" Yank, enraged by her disgust, swears to revenge himself, but he never sees her again, nor does she re-enter the play, where she appears only in two short scenes. Her insignificance is a cardinal defect in it The hairy ape begins a futile war on society. But his end is casual. He visits the monkey house of New York Zoo, where he sees a gorilla, and enters its cage, and is crushed to death in its arms. The gorilla then escapes to ravage! Here, as always, Mr O'Neill is surprisingly insufficient Shakespeare superbly surpasses him in *The Tempest*. There is more in H G Wells's *Food of the Gods*

*The Hairy Ape* is not the only play in which Mr. O'Neill challenges comparison with Shakespeare His work on miscegenation, *All God's Chillun Got*

<sup>7</sup>*The Tempest*, V, 1, 181-184 Miranda had never seen a man except her father Prospero and the monster Caliban When the tempest ceases at the opening of the play, a shipload of men, including Ferdinand, who is destined to wed Miranda, has been deposited on the island shores (as planned by Prospero) Miranda exclaims in this passage over her first view of handsome men, finding them indeed representatives of a wonderful new world —Ed

*Wings*, ought to be better than *Othello*, since its subject is more familiar to any American than it could have been to any Elizabethan, but in this play, too, Mr O'Neill comes a terrible cropper, bringing no thought to his theme His Negro has no magnitude *Othello* is a great soldier Desdemona has a proud spirit, even when she is most submissive, and her nature is noble But there is neither pride nor nobility in the slum drab, Ella Downey, who marries Jim Harris, the Negro who yearns to be a lawyer when he has only the mental equipment of a Pullman Car attendant Ella does not marry Jim, as Desdemona married the Moor, because her heart is stirred to admiration of his great and heroic deeds She marries him in neurotic despair, after a spell in the stews Robert Mayo, in *Beyond the Horizon*, is a peevish Hamlet who whines and snivels through his futile and dismal life This play is intellectually, as well as physically, tuberculous Its lungs are full of holes Mr O'Neill does not let his audience off a single hacking cough. One reference to Julius Caesar's epilepsy—"he hath the falling sickness"—suffices for Shakespeare, but if Mr O'Neill had written the play, the emperor would have thrown innumerable fits through fifteen garrulous acts. It is in this play, *Beyond the Horizon*, the first of his long works to be performed, that the theme of all Mr O'Neill's plays is set out.<sup>1</sup> frustration and disillusionment Robert Mayo is the progenitor of a long line of ineffectual egotists whose ambition far exceeds their ability Incapable of anything but sentimental longing for what he can neither attain nor do, he groans against life, floundering from folly to folly, and blaming existence for his inefficiency In a burst of flatulent oratory, he tells his broken-spirited wife, herself little better than he is, that he will sell the farm he has inherited and start a new life in a city "I'll write—or something!" He has never shown the slightest sign of ability to write even a handbill The remark is typical of his general impotence "I'll write—or something!" He is a crapulous Micawber whose wife is rightly eager to desert him

Mr O'Neill's supreme challenge to the classics was made in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where he dares comparison with Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*. He is, of course, as much entitled to take the Aeschylean theme and set it in the period of the Civil War as Shakespeare was to re-write Hamlet, but when a man borrows on that scale, he should be careful to surpass or, at least, be equal with the lender It is a mistake to think you are Shakespeare when you are manifestly Kyd *Mourning Becomes Electra* is Mr O'Neill's masterpiece, and is superbly constructed. In no other work, except the charming, almost conventional, comedy, *Ah, Wilderness*—a surprising piece, because of its sanity and normal, likeable people—does Mr O'Neill display so much virtuosity But we have a different tale to tell when we come to the spiritual values of the trilogy.

Clytemnestra had several substantial reasons for murdering Agamemnon, apart from any over-ruling power which may have compelled her to commit the crime, and the most potent of them was the sacrifice of Iphigenia But what compulsion had Christine Mannon to murder her husband? The house possessed of an evil is an element in the two trilogies, but a religious belief

supports that of Aeschylus. What supports Mr O'Neill's Christine makes a vague complaint against Mannon's behaviour on her wedding night Her romance, for she had loved the handsome soldier, had turned that night to disgust Yet she had lived with him for a quarter of a century! Clytemnestra never loved Agamemnon She was, like Cassandra, one of his spoils of war "By force you wedded me," she cries in *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

I never loved you Tantalus you slew,  
My first dear husband, and my little son,  
You tore from my breast

Nevertheless she had been a good and submissive wife to Agamemnon, bearing him three daughters and a son, and would have remained so had he not committed the final, unforgivable crime against her Himself a superstitious man, he had sought to put heart in his sullen soldiers by sacrificing their eldest daughter at the suggestion of Calchas the priest And for what?

To win back Helen Your own child for a wanton,  
Your dearest for a foe!

Euripides puts bitter words on Clytemnestra's lips, but who will deny that they were justified? Is there any motive in Christine Mannon's mind equal to hers? Christine is not a spoil of war, the widow of a slain soldier, the mother of a son murdered by the man she must now marry Nor has her daughter by this Agamemnon been sacrificed in appeasement of frivolous and whimsical gods in a war for a premature film star. Compared with Clytemnestra, Christine is motiveless; a mawkish schoolgirl with a crude, novelettish mind Psychoanalysis, as it is understood in Greenwich Village, plays havoc with Mr. O'Neill's thought in this play as it does in a badly bungled piece, *Strange Interlude*, where ideas on neurology are as far removed from fact as Ibsen's idea of inherited taint /198/ in *Ghosts* Artists who meddle with raw science and rawer medicine are apt to ruin themselves.

Mr. O'Neill's technique has been extolled for its experimental character, but it is clumsy and sometimes surprisingly ingenuous He was not a novice when he wrote *Beyond the Horizon*, yet that play, which has six scenes when three would suffice, is singularly incontinent and full of loose ends One of the characters is a two-year-old child with a substantial speaking part! A farmer brings a team of plough horses into the first scene for two minutes Neither he nor they serve any purpose. In Act II, Scene 1, Robert tells his wife, Ruth, to prepare herself for bad news, but is interrupted before he can break it to her. The news is never imparted The soliloquies could not be removed from *Hamlet* without leaving a bleeding wound, but there would not be a scar if almost the whole of the soliloquies were removed from *Strange Interlude*, a play which would be greatly improved if the last three scenes were omitted. Years leap from decade to decade in Mr. O'Neill's work in a very careless rapture. We need not become slaves to the doctrine of dramatic unities alleged to have been laid down by Aristotle, who was not a dramatist, to find fault with this scattering of time. To keep a play "as far as possible

within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that," is a good general rule, but if it were made into a law which must not be broken, an attempt which Aristotle did not make, neither *A Winter's Tale* nor *Back to Methuselah* could have been written.<sup>8</sup>

To defy the alleged Aristotelian law, however, is one thing and to treat time as confetti is another. Thirty years separate the two acts of *Diff'rent*, a play which ends with incredible suicides. Fifteen years divide the first and second scenes of *Marco Millions*. There are eleven years between the sixth and seventh acts of *Strange Interlude*. The first part of *The Fountain* is separated from the second by twenty years. Manifestly, Mr. O'Neill's people did not cease to exist during these long intervals. Things must have happened to them. Their characters must have developed. But experience and growth are not revealed, and the intervals are arbitrary. There are tricks with stage directions in almost every play Mr. O'Neill has written, many of them naively pretentious, as in *The Hairy Ape*, where we are informed five or six times that the stokers, when they speak in chorus, have "a brazen, metallic quality as if their throats were phonograph horns." Each chorused ejaculation "is followed by a chorus of hard, barking laughter." This is the sort of stuff that might be written by an earnest sophomore who has listened too long to professors of dramatic literature at chateaus in the Rocky Mountains. There is indeed an air of juvenility about most of Mr. O'Neill's work. An adolescent who had just heard the facts of life, and felt very indignant about them, might have written *The First Man*. He is terribly verbose, making Mr. Shaw seem tongue-tied. *The Iceman Cometh* is at least an hour too long. There are no memorable words in his dialogue, not a single sentence which is likely to become part of his country's speech or to remain in any man's recollection as an illuminating phrase. Some of his sub-human characters, such as the Cabots in *Desire Under the Elms*, are accustomed to murmur "purty" when they see a sunset, but that is as far as any of them gets in the search for beauty. The Irish stoker, Mick Burke, in *Anna Christie*, must have spent hours in learning Synge's plays by heart. He talks as we might have expected Christy Mahon to talk after he had joined the I.R.A.<sup>9</sup> This is one of the best of the O'Neill plays, but it is marred by melodrama and rendered ludicrous at the end by Mick's dismay when he thinks that Anna, whom he is about to marry, may be a Protestant!

But there is a sense of the theatre in the plays which proves that the hours spent by Mr. O'Neill in listening to his father acting in *Monte Cristo* were not spent without effect. How skilfully he can construct a play, how charmingly he can create presentable people is apparent (as has been said) in *Ah*,

<sup>8</sup>*A Winter's Tale*, a late Shakespearean comedy in which sixteen years elapse between acts III and IV. *Back to Methuselah*, by George Bernard Shaw, was originally scheduled for presentation on several successive nights because of its inordinate length — Ed

<sup>9</sup>Christy Mahon, Irish hero of *The Playboy of the Western World* by John Millington Synge (1871–1909), who is made a town celebrity for supposedly killing his wicked father, until the father turns up very much alive. The I.R.A. was the Irish Republican Army, which fought the British for Irish independence during and shortly after the First World War — Ed

*Wilderness* a comedy on which one comes with mingled pleasure and surprise. How much of Mr. O'Neill's popularity in America depends upon his extensive use of gutter speech and low-grade characters is hard to say. *The Iceman Cometh* is entirely inhabited by such people, uttering very vigorously the language of the stews. Even in *Ah, Wilderness* there is a scene full of it.

There was a fog on the night in 1916 when Mr. O'Neill's first play to be publicly performed, a short seapiece entitled *Bound East for Cardiff*, was produced in a fish-shed on a wharf in Provincetown, on the coast of Massachusetts. The fish-shed had been transfigured, and was now The Wharf Theatre, with a "capacity" of ninety persons, a little smaller than the bandbox in Bergen<sup>10</sup> in which Bjornson and Ibsen learnt their craft. The cast included the author, who, however, failed to convince his audience that his father lived again on the stage. The salt tide seeped through holes in the floor as the band of unsophisticated Greenwich Villagers, who had fled from the disenchantments of New York to settle on that bleak and solitary coast, to regenerate the drama and enrich the minds of artless fishermen with news of *Das Kapital*, watched the birthpangs of America's greatest dramatist. The fog entered Mr. O'Neill's soul that night and has remained there ever since. "Fog, fog, fog, all bloody time," cries Anna Christie's Swedish-American father as he shakes his fist at the universe. "You can't see where you vas going, no!" And Anna herself, an embittered drab, sums us up: "We're all poor nuts," she moans. The fog has thickened in *The Iceman Cometh*; a thick, yellow, suffocating fog; and it makes Larry Slade, the spineless Celt, a convert to death, too cowardly to seek the end he craves. When Faustus, in Marlowe's play, summoned Alexander the Great and Helen of Troy from the grave, they came, but did not speak. Like Bottom,<sup>11</sup> they had been translated, and the mind of man could not conceive what they had seen. But when Mr. O'Neill, in *Lazarus Laughs* [*sic*], summons the brother of Martha and Mary from the tomb, Lazarus comes in a fit of the giggles. Even the giggles have ceased for Larry Slade. There is nothing left for him but a delusive bottle and the hope that he will one day die of delirium tremens. /199/

### **"Trying to Like O'Neill"**

*Eric Bentley*

It would be nice to like O'Neill. He is the leading American playwright, damn him, damn all; and damning all is a big responsibility. It is tempting to

<sup>10</sup>The bandbox in Bergen, the small art theatre in Bergen, Norway, where Ibsen's plays were first presented — Ed

<sup>11</sup>Bottom, one of the comic tradesmen in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, whose head is changed into an ass's head. His friend, on seeing him, screams, "Thou art translated!" — Ed

"Trying to Like O'Neill," *The Kenyon Review*, 14 (July 1952), 476–492

damn all the rest and make of O'Neill an exception. He *is* an exception in so many ways. He has cared less for temporary publicity than for lasting and deserved fame. When he was successful on Broadway he was not sucked in by Broadway. The others have vanity, O'Neill has self-respect. No dickering with the play doctors in Manhattan hotel rooms. He had the guts to go away and the guts to stay away. O'Neill has always had the grownup writer's concern for that continuity and development which must take place quietly and from within. In a theatre which chiefly attracts idiots and crooks he was a model of good sense and honor.

In 1946 he was raised to the American peerage: his picture was on the cover of *Time* magazine. The national playwright was interviewed by the nationalist press. It was his chance to talk rot and be liked for it. It was his chance to spout optimistic uplift and play the patriotic pundit. O'Neill said,

I'm going on the theory that the United States, instead of being the most successful country in the world is the greatest failure . . . because it was given everything more than any other country. Though moving as rapidly as it has, it hasn't acquired any real roots. Its main idea is that everlasting game of trying to possess your own soul by the possession of something outside it too . . . /476/

Henry Luce possesses a good many things besides his own soul. He possesses *Life* as well as *Time*, and in the former he published an editorial complaining of the lack of inspiration to be found in the national playwright. In *The Iceman Cometh* there were no princes and heroes, only bums and drunks. This was "democratic snobbism." Henry Luce was evidently in favor of something more aristocratic (the pin-up girls in his magazine notwithstanding). Inevitably, though, what the aristocrats of *Time Inc.* objected to in O'Neill was his greatest virtue: his ability to stay close to the humbler forms of American life as he had seen them. It is natural that his claim to be a national playwright should rest chiefly on a critical and realistic attitude to American life which they reject. Like the three great Irish playwrights,<sup>1</sup> O'Neill felt his "belonging" to his country so deeply that he took its errors to heart and, although admittedly he wished his plays to be universal, they all start at home; they are specifically a criticism of American life.<sup>†</sup> *Marco Millions* is only the bluntest of his critical studies. Interest in the specifically American pattern of living sustains his lightest work *Ah, Wilderness!* New England patterns are integral to *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, the latter being an attempt at an *Oresteia* in terms of American history, with the Civil War as an equivalent of the Trojan War.

<sup>1</sup>William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), John Millington Synge (1871-1909), and Sean O'Casey (1884-1964) —Ed



The protagonist of *The Iceman Cometh* is a product of Hoosier piety, a study much more deeply rooted in American life than Arthur Miller's of a salesman going to his death. It would be nice to like O'Neill because the Luce magazines *dislike* him—that is, because he is opposed to everything they stand for.

Last autumn, when I was invited to direct the German-language *première* of *The Iceman*, along with Kurt Hirschfeld, I decided I should actually succeed in liking O'Neill. I reminded myself that he had been honored with prefaces by Joseph Wood Krutch and Lionel Trilling, that he had aroused enthusiasm in the two hardest-to-please of the New York critics, Stark Young /477/ and George Jean Nathan, and so forth. I even had a personal motive to aid and abet the pressure of pure reason. My own published strictures on O'Neill had always been taken as a display of gratuitous pugnacity, amusing or reprehensible according to my reader's viewpoint. Under a rain of dissent one begins to doubt one's opinions and to long for the joy that is not confined to heaven when a sinner repenteth. Now it is a fallacy that drama critics are strongly attached to their own opinions, actually they would far rather be congratulated on having the flexibility to change their minds. In short, I would have been glad to write something in praise of O'Neill, and I actually did lecture—and speak on the Swiss radio—as an O'Neillite. If this seems disingenuous, I can only plead that I spoke as a director, not as critic, and that it is sometimes a great relief to do so. There is something too godlike about criticism; it is a defiance of the injunction to men: Judge not that ye be not judged; it is a strain. And if it would be subhuman to give up the critical attitude for mere liking and disliking, the directorial, interpretative attitude seems a more mature and challenging alternative.

Both critic and director are aware of faults, but whereas it is the critic's job to point them out, it is the director's job to cover them up, if only by strongly bringing out a play's merits. It is not true that a director accepts a play with its faults on its head, that he must follow the playwright even into what he believes to be error. He cannot be a self-respecting interpreter without following his own taste and judgment. Thus, Hirschfeld and I thought we were doing our best by O'Neill in toning certain things down and playing others full blast. Specifically, there seemed to us to be in *The Iceman Cometh* a genuine and a non-genuine element, the former, which we regarded as the core, being realistic, the latter, which we took as inessential excrescence, being expressionistic. I had seen what came of author-worshipping direction in the Theatre Guild production, where all O'Neill's faults were presented to the public with careful reverence. In order to find /478/ the essential—or at least the better—O'Neill we agreed to forego much O'Neillism.

Our designer, Teo Otto, agreed. I told him of Robert Edmond Jones's Rembrandtesque lighting and of the way in which Jones, in his sketches, tried to create the phantasmagoria of a Strindberg dream play, but Otto, though we discussed various sensational ways of setting the play—with

slanting floors and Caligari corridors<sup>2</sup> or what not—agreed in the end that we were taking O'Neill's story more seriously if we tried simply to underline the sheer reality, the sheer banality and ugliness, of its locale. Instead of darkness, and dim, soulfully colored lights, we used a harsh white glare, suggesting unshaded electric bulbs in a bare room. And the rooms *were* bare. On the walls Otto suggested the texture of disintegrating plaster: a dripping faucet was their only ornament. A naked girder closed the rooms in from above. And, that this real setting be seen as setting and not as reality itself, the stage was left open above the girder. While Hirschfeld and I were busy avoiding the abstractness of expressionism, Otto made sure that we did not go to the other extreme—a piddling and illusion-mongering naturalism.

To get at the core of reality in *The Iceman*—which is also its artistic, its dramatic core—you have to cut away the rotten fruit of unreality around it. More plainly stated: you have to cut. The play is far too long—not so much in asking that the audience sit there so many hours as on sheer internal grounds. The main story is meant to have suspense but we are suspended so long we forget all about it. One can cut a good many of Larry's speeches since he is forever re-phrasing a pessimism which is by no means hard to understand the first time. One can cut down the speeches of Hugo since they are both too long and too pretentious. It is such a pretentiousness, replete with obvious and unimaginative symbolism, that constitutes the expressionism of the play. Hugo is a literary conception—by Gorky out of Dostoevsky.

We cut about an hour out of the play. It wasn't always easy. /479/ Not wishing to cut out whole characters we mutilated some till they had, I'm afraid, no effective existence. But we didn't forget that some of the incidental details of *The Iceman* are among O'Neill's finest achievements. Nothing emerged more trimphantly from our shortened, crisper version than the comic elements. With a dash of good humor O'Neill can do more than with all his grandiloquent lugubriousness. Nothing struck my fancy more, in our production, than the little comedy of the Boer general and the English captain. O'Neill is also very good at a kind of homely genre painting. Harry's birthday party with its cake and candles and the whores singing his late wife's favorite song, "She Is the Sunshine of Paradise Alley," is extremely well done, and no other American playwright could do it without becoming either too sentimental or too sophisticated. We tried to build the scene up into a great theatric image, and were assisted by a magnificent character actor as Harry (Kurt Horwitz). It is no accident that the character of Harry came out so well both in New York and Zurich: the fact is that O'Neill can draw such a man more pointedly than he can his higher flying creations.

I am obviously a biased judge but I think Zurich was offered a more dramatic evening than New York. The abridging of the text did lay bare the main story and release its suspense. We can see the action as presumably

<sup>2</sup>Caligari corridors, reference to an early experimental film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which involved almost surrealistic rooms and corridors, like a sinister carnival funhouse—Ed

we were meant to see it. There is Hickey, and there is Parritt. Both are pouring out their false confessions and professions and holding back their essential secret. Yet, inexorably, though against their conscious will, both are seeking punishment. Their two stories are brought together through Larry Slade whose destiny, in contrast to his intention, is to extract the secret of both protagonists. Hickey's secret explodes, and Larry at last gives Parritt what he wants: a death sentence. The upshot of the whole action is that Larry is brought from a posturing and oratorical pessimism to a real despair. Once the diffuse speeches are trimmed and the minor characters reduced to truly minor proportions, Larry is revealed as the center /480/ of the play, and the audience can watch the two stories being played out before him.

A systematic underlining of all that is realistic in the play did, as we hoped it would, bring the locale—Jimmy the Priest's—to successful theatrical realization, despite the deletion of much of O'Neill's detail. It gave body and definition to what otherwise would have remained insubstantial and shapeless, the comedy was sharpened, the sentiment purified. I will not say that production realized the idea of the play which Hirschfeld, Otto, and I entertained. In theatre there is always too much haste and bungling for that. One can only say that the actuality did not fall further short of the idea in this instance than in others.

And yet it was not a greater success with the public than the New York production, and whereas the New York critics were restrained by awe before the national playfight, the Swiss critics, when they were bored, said so. My newly won liking for O'Neill would perhaps have been unshaken by the general opinion—except that in the end I couldn't help sharing it.

I enjoyed the rehearsal period—unreservedly. I didn't have to conceal my reservations about O'Neill out of tact. They ceased to exist. They were lost in the routine, the tension, and the delight of theatre work. I don't mean to suggest that you could lose yourself thus in any script, however bad, there are scripts that bear down on a director with all the dead weight of their fatuity. But in an O'Neill script there are problems, technical and intellectual, and every one a challenge. I gladly threw myself headlong into that mad joy of the theatre in which the world and its atomic bombs recede and one's own first night seems to be the goal toward which creation strives.

The shock of the first night was the greater. It was not one of those catastrophic first nights when on all faces you can see expectancy fading into ennui or lack of expectancy freezing into a smug *I Told You So*. But, theatrically speaking, mild approval is little better. Theatrical art is a form of aggression. Like the /481/ internal combustion engine it proceeds by a series of explosions. Since it is in the strictest sense the most shocking of the arts, it has failed most utterly when no shock has been felt, and it has failed in a large measure when the shock is mild. *The Iceman* aroused mild interest, and I had to agree that *The Iceman* was only mildly interesting. When I read the critics, who said about my O'Neill production precisely what I as critic had said about other O'Neill productions, my period of liking O'Neill was over.

Of course there were shortcomings which could not be blamed on O'Neill. We were presenting him in German, and in addition to the normal translation problems there were two special ones: that of translating contrasting dialects and that of reproducing the tone of American, semi-gangster, hard-boiled talk. There was little the translator could do about the dialects. She wisely did not lay under contribution the various regions of Germany or suggest foreign accents, and her idea of using a good deal of Berlin slang had to be modified for our Swiss public. One simply forewent many of O'Neill's effects or tried to get them by nonverbal means—and by that token one realized how much O'Neill does in the original with the various forms of the vernacular spoken in New York. One also realizes how much he uses the peculiarly American institution of Tough Talk, now one of the conventions of the American stage, a lingo which the young playwright learns, just as at one time the young poet learnt Milton's poetic diction. In German there seems to be no real equivalent of this lingo because there is no equivalent of the psychology from which it springs and to which it caters. And there is no teaching the actors how to speak their lines in the hardboiled manner. Irony is lost, and the dialogue loses its salt. This loss and that of dialect flavor were undoubtedly great deficiencies. But not the greatest. I saw the production several times and, in addition to the flaws for which we of the Schauspielhaus were responsible, there stood out clearer each time the known, if not notorious, faults of O'Neill. True, he is a man of the theatre /482/ and, true, he is an eloquent writer composing, as his colleagues on Broadway usually do not, under the hard compulsion of something he has to say. But his gifts are mutually frustrating. His sense of theatrical form is frustrated by an eloquence that decays into mere repetitious garrulousness. His eloquence is frustrated by the extreme rigidity of the theatrical mold into which it is poured—jelly in an iron jar. Iron. Study, for example, the stage directions of *The Iceman*, and you will see how carefully O'Neill has drawn his ground plan. There everyone sits—a row of a dozen and a half men. And as they sit, the plot progresses, as each new stage is reached, the bell rings, and the curtain comes down. Jelly. Within the tyrannically, mechanically rigid scenes, there is an excessive amount of freedom. The order of speeches can be juggled without loss, and almost any speech can be cut in half.

The eloquence might of course be regarded as clothing that is necessary to cover a much too mechanical man. Certainly, though we gained more by abridging the play than we lost, the abridgement did call attention rather cruelly to the excessively schematic character of the play. Everything is contrived, *voulu*,<sup>3</sup> drawn on the blackboard, thought out beforehand, imposed on the material by the dead hand of calculation. We had started out from the realization that the most lifeless schemata in this overschematic play are the expressionistic ones but we had been too sanguine in hoping to conceal or cancel them. They are foreshadowed already in the table group-

<sup>3</sup>*voulu*, past participle of the French verb *vouloir*, "to wish or desire", hence, the play is "pre-wished" or "pre-planned" — Ed

ings of Act One (as specified in O'Neill's stage directions) They hold the last act in a death grip Larry and Parritt are on one side shouting their duet Hickey is in the center singing his solo And at the right, arranged en bloc, is everyone else, chanting their comments in what O'Neill himself calls a "chorus"

It would perhaps be churlish to press the point, were O'Neill's ambition in this last act not symptomatic both of his whole endeavor as a playwright and of the endeavor of many other serious playwrights in our time It is the ambition to transcend realism. /483/ O'Neill spoke of it nearly thirty years ago in a note on Strindberg

It is only by means of some form of "super-naturalism" that we may express in the theatre what we comprehend intuitively of that self-obsession which is the particular discount we moderns have to pay for the loan of life The old naturalism—or realism if you will (I wish to God some genius were gigantic enough to define clearly the separateness of these terms once and for all!)—no longer applies It represents our fathers' daring aspirations towards self-recognition by holding the family kodak up to ill-nature But to us then audacity is blague, we have taken too many snapshots of each other in every graceless position We have endured too much from the banality of surfaces <sup>4</sup>

So far, so good. This is only a warning against that extreme and narrow form of realism generally known as naturalism. Everyone agrees The mistake is only to talk as if it followed that one must get away from realism altogether, a mistake repeated by every poetaster who thinks he can rise above Ibsen by writing flowerily (e.g. Christopher Fry as quoted and endorsed by *Time* magazine) Wherever O'Neill tries to clarify his non-realistic theory the only thing that is clear is lack of clarity. For example:

It was far from my idea in writing *The Great God Brown* that the background pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings. . . I meant *it* always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves, forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, action they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend *it*. *It* is Mystery—the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event—or accident—in any life on earth And it is this mystery which I want to realize in the theatre <sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>From "Strindberg and Our Theatre," written by O'Neill for the *Provincetown Playbill* for the first performance of the 1923–1924 season *blague*, humbug, phoney —Ed

<sup>5</sup>From "The Playwright Explains," released simultaneously to several newspapers on February 14, 1926, in an endeavor to clarify *The Great God Brown* Reprinted in Arthur Hobson Quinn's *History of the American Drama, from the Civil War to the Present Day* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927) —Ed

I have italicized the word *it* to underline the shift in reference that takes place. The first two times "it" is "the background /484/ pattern of conflicting tides in the soul of man." The third time "it" is just a blur, meaning nothing in particular, exemplifying rather than clearing up the mystery which O'Neill finds important. An event can be mysterious, but how can its mystery be its meaning? And how can we know that its mystery is its meaning if we do "not understand" it? And what would constitute a "realization" of such a phenomenon in the theatre?

In a letter to Thomas Hobson Quinn,<sup>6</sup> O'Neill tries again. He has been seeking to be a poet, he says,

and to see the transfiguring nobility of tragedy, in as near the Greek sense as one can grasp it, in seemingly the most ignoble, debased lives. And just here is where I am a most confirmed mystic too, for I'm always, always trying to interpret *Life in terms of lives, never just lives in terms of characters*. I'm always acutely conscious of the Force behind (Fate, God, our biological past creating our present, whatever one calls it—Mystery certainly) and of the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression. And my profound conviction is that this is the only subject worth writing about and that it is possible—or can be—to develop [syntax?] a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage. Of course, this is very much of a dream, but where theatre is concerned, one must have a dream and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!

I have italicized this time phrases where we expect O'Neill to say something, where we even think for a moment that he *has* said something. Reading them several times over, we find that we could give them a meaning—but without any assurance that it is O'Neill's. What is interpreting "Life in terms of lives" and what is "mystical" about it? What does it mean to be "expressed" by a Force—as against being an incident in "its expression"? /485/ Isn't O'Neill comforting himself with verbiage? For what connection is there—beyond the external ones of *Mourning Becomes Electra*—between his kind of drama and the Greek? How could one be ennobled by identifying oneself with any of his characters?

It is no use wanting to get away from realism (or anything else) unless you know what you want to get away to. Raising a dust of symbols and poetisms is not to give artistic expression to a sense of mystery. It is merely, in O'Neill's case, to take your eye off the object. (Cf. Ibsen: "To be a poet is

<sup>6</sup>Bentley means the late Arthur Hobson Quinn, professor of literature at the University of Pennsylvania, student of American drama, and author of dramatic histories.—Ed

chiefly to see ") It seems to me that O'Neill's eye was off the object, and on Dramatic and Poetic Effects, when he composed the Hickey story. Not being clearly seen, the man is unclearly presented to the audience O'Neill misleads them for several hours, then asks them to reach back into their memory and re-interpret all Hickey's actions and attitudes from the beginning Is Hickey the character O'Neill needed as the man who tries to deprive the gang of their illusions? He (as it turns out) is a maniac But if the attempt to disillusion the gang is itself mad, it would have more dramatic point made by a sane idealist (as in *The Wild Duck* )

Does O'Neill find the meaning of his story by looking at the people and the events themselves or by imposing it on them? There are ideas in the play, and we have the impression that what should be the real substance of it is mere (not always deft) contrivance to illustrate the ideas The main ideas are two first the one we have touched on, that people may as well keep their illusions, second, that one should not hate and punish but love and forgive The whole structure of the play is so inorganic, it is hardly to be expected that the two ideas would be organically related The difficulty is in finding what relation they do have In a way the truth-illusion theme is a red herring, and, as in *Così è (se vi pare)*,<sup>7</sup> the author's real interest is in the love-hate theme Pirandello, however, presents the red herring *as* a red herring, relates his "false" theme to this real one O'Neill is unclear because he fails to do so A high official of the Theatre Guild /486/ remarked "the point is, you aren't *meant* to understand " In Pirandello this is indeed the point of the Ponza/Froja story Pirandello *makes* the point, and in art a point has to be made before it can be said to exist. For O'Neill it is merely a point he might have made As things are, it is his play, and not life, that is unintelligible

*The Iceman*, of course, has big intentions written all over it Most of O'Neill's plays have big intentions written all over them. He has written [to George Jean Nathan] of

the death of an old God and the failure of science and materialism to give any satisfying new one for the surviving primitive religious instinct to find a meaning for life in, and to comfort its fears of death with It seems to me [he adds] anyone trying to do big work nowadays must have this subject behind all the little subjects of his plays or novels.

In other words, O'Neill's intentions as a writer are no less vast than Dostoevsky's *The Iceman* is his version of crime and punishment What is surprising is not that his achievements fall below Dostoevsky's but that critics—including some recent rehabilitators—have taken the will for the deed and find O'Neill's "nobler conception" of theatre enough "Conception" is patently a euphemism for "intention" and they are applauding

<sup>7</sup>*Così è (se vi pare)*, *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*, by Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) Pirandello's major plays all deal with the unreality of reality, the inability of the human mind to establish a clear line between that which is imaginary and that which actually exists —Ed

O'Neill for strengthening the pavement of hell. In this they are not disingenuous, their own intentions are also good, they are simply a party to a general gullibility. People believe what they are told, and in our time a million units of human energy are spent on the telling to every one rather than on examining what is told; reason is swamped by propaganda and publicity. Hence it is that an author's professions and intentions, broadcast not only by himself but by an army of interested and even disinterested parties, determine what people think his work is. The realm of false culture thus created is not all on one level, brows here, as elsewhere, may be low or high. No brows are higher indeed than /487/ those of the upper stratum of the subintelligentsia. They spend their time seeking sublimities, works which provide the answers to the crying questions of our time, impassioned appeals for justice, daring indictments of tyranny, everything surefire. Seek and you shall find: a writer like O'Neill does not give them the optimism of an "American century" but he provides profundities galore, and technical innovations, and (as he himself says) Mystery. Now there is a large contingent of the subintelligentsia in the theatre world. They are seen daily at the Algonquin and nightly at Sardi's.<sup>8</sup> They don't all like O'Neill, yet his "profound" art is inconceivable without them. O'Neill doesn't like *them*, but he needs them, and could never have dedicated himself to "big work" had their voices not been in his ears telling him he was big. The man who could not be bribed by the Broadway tycoons was seduced by the Broadway intelligentsia.

At one time he performed a historic function, that of helping the American theatre to grow up. In all his plays an earnest attempt is made to interpret life, this fact in itself places O'Neill above his predecessors in American drama and beside his colleagues in the novel and poetry. He was a good playwright insofar as he kept within the somewhat narrow range of his own sensibility. When he stays close to a fairly simple reality and when, by way of technique, he uses fairly simple forms of realism or fairly simple patterns of melodrama, he can render the bite and tang of reality or, alternatively, he can startle and stir us with his effects. If he is never quite a poet, he is occasionally able—as we have seen in *The Iceman*—to create the striking theatric image.

But the more he attempts, the less he succeeds. *Lazarus Laughed* and *The Great God Brown* and *Days Without End* are inferior to *The Emperor Jones* and *Anna Christie* and *Ah, Wilderness*.<sup>9</sup> O'Neill has never learnt this lesson. The idea of "big work" lured him out into territory where his sensibility is entirely inoperative. Even his most ardent admirers have little to /488/ say in favor of *Dynamo*, the only play where he frontally assails the problem of "the death of an old God and the failure of science." A hundred novelists have dealt more subtly with hidden motives than O'Neill did in his famous essay in psychological subtlety, *Strange Interlude*, a play which is equally

<sup>8</sup>Algonquin, New York hotel, a favorite of show people. Sardi's, famous restaurant in the heart of the New York theatre district, a hangout for show people and a gathering place to await opening night reviews — Ed



inferior as a study of upper-class Americans. Then there is his desire to re-create ancient tragedy. Though no one is more conscious than he that America is not an Athens, the "Greek dream"—the desire to be an Aeschylus—has been his nightmare.

The classic and notorious problem about tragedy in modern dress has been that the characters, not being over life-size but rather below it, excite pity without admiration and therefore without terror. Though O'Neill has talked of an "ennobling identification" with protagonists, he has only once tried to do anything about it. Only in *Mourning Becomes Electra* are the characters over life-size. Unhappily this is not because of the size of their bones but, as it were, their inflation with gas, cultural and psychological.

The cultural gas is the classic story. The use of classic stories has been customary for so long, and has recently come into such vogue again, that writers have forgotten their obligation to make the stories their own. They figure that the Aeschylean names will themselves establish the dignity and identity of the subject, while they—the modern adaptors—get the credit and draw the royalties. They are not necessarily conscious opportunists. They probably assume, with some psychologists and anthropologists, that archetypal patterns of myth elicit profound responses of themselves, irrespective of presentation; if this were true the poet would be unnecessary. It is a belief not to be discussed by a critic since the very fact that he criticizes presupposes its falsity. If we ask what difference it makes that Orestes and Lavinia are versions of Orestes and Electra the answer is that they thereby acquire an artificial prestige. They have become more important without any creative work on the author's part. We now associate them /489/ with the time-honored and sublime. They are inflated with cultural gas. It's like finding out that your girl friend is the daughter of a duke. If you are impressionable, you are impressed, she will seem different from now on, clad in all your illusions about nobility.

We are told that myth is useful because the audience knows the plot already and can turn its attention to the how and why. To this I would not protest that all adaptors, including O'Neill, change the mythic plots, though this is true, what I have in mind is, rather, that they do not always change them enough. Events in their works have often no organic place there, they are fossilized vestiges of the older version. We ask: why does this character do that? And the answer is: because his Greek prototype did it. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the myth makes it hard for O'Neill to let his people have their own identity at all, yet to the extent that they do have one, it is, naturally, a modern and American identity, and this in turn makes their ancient and Greek actions seem wildly improbable. Heaven knows that murders take place today as in ancient times; but the murders in O'Neill are not given today's reality.

Instead, the characters are blown up with psychological gas. O'Neill has boasted his ignorance of Freud but such ignorance is not enough. He should be ignorant also of the watered-down Freudianism of Sardi's and the Algonquin, the Freudianism of all those who are ignorant of Freud, the Freudian-

anism of the subintelligentsia. It is through this Freudianism, and through it alone, that O'Neill has made the effort, though a vain one, to assimilate the myth to modern life. Now what is it that your subintellectual knows about Freud? That he "put everything down to sex." Precisely, and that is what O'Neill does with the myth. Instead of reverent family feeling to unite an Orestes and an Electra we have incest. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is all sex talk. Sex talk—not sex lived and embodied but sex talked of and fingered. The sex talk of the subintelligentsia. It is the only means /490/ by which some sort of eloquence and urgency gets into the play, the source of what is meant to be its poetry. The Civil War never gains the importance it might have had in this telling of the story, it is flooded out by sex. "New England," surely a cultural conception with wider reference than this, stands only, in O'Neill, for the puritanic (i.e. sexually repressive) attitude.

O'Neill is an acute case of what Lawrence called "sex in the head." Sex is almost the only idea he has—has insistently—and it is for him *only* an idea. Looking back on what I wrote about him a few years ago, I still maintain that O'Neill is no thinker. He is so little a thinker, it is dangerous for him to think. To prove this you have only to look at the fruits of his thinking, his comparatively thoughtless plays are better. For a non-thinker he thinks too much.

Almost as bad as sex in the head is tragedy in the head, for tragedy too can decline into a doctrine and dwindle into an idea. And when the thing is absent its "idea" is apt to go soft. Tragedy is hard, but the idea of tragedy ("the tragic view of life," "the tragic sense of life" etc.) is seldom evoked without nostalgic longing. And the most decadent longing is the longing for barbarism, *nostalgie de la boue*,<sup>9</sup> such as is voiced by our tragedy-loving poets:

Poetry is not a civilizer, rather the reverse, for great poetry appeals to the most primitive instincts. . . . Tragedy has been regarded, ever since Aristotle, as a moral agent, a purifier of the mind and emotions. But the story of *Medea* is about a criminal adventurer and his gun-moll, it is no more moral than the story of Frankie and Johnny, only more ferocious. And so with the yet higher summits of Greek Tragedy, the Agamemnon series and the *Oedipus Rex*, they all tell primitive horror stories, and the conventional pious sentiments of the chorus are more than balanced by the bad temper and wickedness, or folly, of the principal characters. What makes them noble is the poetry, the poetry and the beautiful shapes of the plays, and the extreme violence born of extreme passion. . . . These are stories of disaster and death, and it is /491/ not in order to purge the mind of passions but because death and disaster are exciting. People love disaster, if it does not touch them too nearly—as we run to see a burning house or a motor crash.

<sup>9</sup>*nostalgie de la boue*, longing for the simple life —Ed

Aristotle's view of tragedy is humane, this one—that of Robinson Jeffers—is barbaric without the innocence of barbarism, it is neobarbaric, decadent. O'Neill is too simple and earnest to go all the way with Jeffers. Puritanism and a rough-hewn honesty keep him within the realm of the human. But *Mourning Becomes Electra* does belong, so to speak, to the same world as Jeffers' remarks, a world which titillates itself with tragedy in the head. Your would-be tragedian despises realism, the problem play, liberalism, politics in general, optimism, and what not. (Hence *Mourning Becomes Electra* is unrealistic, unsocial, illiberal, unpolitical, and pessimistic. What of the *Oresteia*? It celebrates the victory of law over arbitrary violence, of the community over the individual. It is optimistic, political, social and with permissible license might be called liberal and realistic as well. *O tempora, o mores!* If one does not like O'Neill, it is not really he that one dislikes—it is our age—of which like the rest of us he is more the victim than the master. /492/)

### **"Eugene O'Neill, the Lonely Revolutionary"**

*Joseph Wood Krutch*

In recent years it has become fashionable to point out that the most important American writers have been lonely men. Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Henry Adams all rejected the ideals of the society into which they were born. So too in his different way did Henry James. Not one of them gave the public what the public was supposed to want, not one of them participated in what was supposed to be the spirit of the age. Each felt himself rejected, each retired into himself, each inhabited a spiritual world which seemed to him a private one. Americans are supposed to be gregarious and yet the literature most admired at the present moment was produced by a group of hermits whose sympathy, even with one another, was decidedly imperfect.

No one, so far as I know, has ever pointed out the obvious fact that Eugene O'Neill, commonly regarded as the most considerable playwright our country has ever produced, fits into this same pattern. (Most of his plays were written during the cheerful, confident twenties but they were far from being cheerful or optimistic, and O'Neill's attitudes were also as different from those of other critics of our society as they were from popular optimism and complacency. At a time when naturalism was the literary norm he wrote plays which were symbolic in method and mystical in intention. While other dissenters were busy with attacks on Main Street, Comstockery, or the worship of Mr. Babbit, he was concerning himself with primitive passions and with dark Gods.)

Sometimes, to be sure, his themes seemed to have an ambiguous relation to those commonly developed. Thus *The Hairy Ape* could be interpreted as liberal sociological protest, *Strange Interlude* could be interpreted as a psychoanalytical study, *Desire Under the Elms* could be, in fact sometimes

was, taken as an attempt to debunk our Puritan ancestors. But this last misinterpretation is only a little more palpably absurd than the others and it was possible only because O'Neill's contemporaries found it so difficult to understand precisely what it was that he was getting at. Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken were dissenters but they were not lonely men. Neither for that matter were Sidney Howard or, in the twenties, Maxwell Anderson. They understood one another, and they soon had a large public which understood them. But O'Neill was lonely in the sense that Hawthorne and Thoreau and Melville were lonely.

In his case as in theirs, this loneliness, this isolation from both the prevailing spirit and from that of others who criticized or rejected it, was the result of a sense that the rebels, hardly less than the complacent majority, missed the point, failed to go deeply enough. In O'Neill, as in Hawthorne and Melville, the protest was not merely rational but had instead a daemonic element. Their premises were almost too far from those of any considerable audience to make communication possible. All had to depend for such attention as they got upon the simple fact that they were obviously strange and powerful rather than upon any fundamental sympathy or understanding.

One consequence of this is that O'Neill's plays, considered simply as plays, are even more revolutionary than they are commonly thought to be. Because what he wanted to communicate was something radically different from what most of his fellow playwrights, either of Europe or America, wanted to communicate, his whole conception of what a play should be was, radically different from the prevailing one. [Almost alone among considerable modern playwrights he attempted Tragedy—with a capital T—and it may very well turn out to be that this single fact sums up better than anything else his ultimate influence and importance.]

In this connection it must be remembered that if the modern drama began with Ibsen it began as an intellectual protest against old-fashioned moral and political ideas rather than as either Tragedy or Comedy. Behind *A Doll's House* and even behind *Ghosts* lies the assumption that the fundamental human problems are solvable by reason and by reasonableness. It is true that in later plays Ibsen receded from this simple optimism and that Strindberg, whom O'Neill has called his master, rejected it utterly. But it was the simplest part of Ibsen's doctrine that his most esteemed second-rate followers—Bjornson, Brieux, Galsworthy and the rest—took up. Shaw, the only other real giant, moved away from them in a direction the opposite from that to be taken by O'Neill. (He pursued rational optimism until it reached a *reductio ad absurdum* in which human beings become mere talking and arguing machines so completely devoid of passions or even irrationalities that they lose all semblance of humanity and become nothing except the counters in a delightful comic game which is often as irrelevant to human life as a puppet show.)

What the lonely O'Neill soon discovered was that neither modern optimism nor modern pessimism corresponded to either his own experience or his own vision. On the one hand, man's unhappiness was not simply the result

of "social maladjustment" "The sorrows of our proud and angry dust are from eternity and shall not fail" On the other hand those sorrows are not merely the ignoble thing which pessimistic naturalism makes of them What obsessed O'Neill was a tragic sense of life not to be expressed either in the mere play of social significance or in the mere drama with an unhappy ending which was the nearest the modern convention ever approached to tragedy He needed something more passionate, and more mystical than that He needed a form which acknowledged man's relevance, not merely to society, but to the universe which is larger than man and larger than human society And the only form which does presuppose what he presupposed is Tragedy in a sense of the term almost lost.

That he succeeded at all in the popular theatre is evidence of his extraordinary power That he has seldom been revived despite both his original success and the esteem in which he has been held is evidence of the fundamental resistance which the unfamiliarity of his preoccupations and his attitudes arouses His best plays always demand of the audience that it enter a world which that audience is afraid of. His universe is one ruled by powers which the comfortable rationalism of the average spectator does not want to acknowledge. His characters are in the grip of passions stronger and more primitive than that same spectator wants to believe possible

Because of these facts one's first impulse is to discover some way of escaping from or of neutralizing his effect The most radical method of achieving these ends is simply to refuse to take him seriously Who is O'Neill that he should venture to attempt what most moderns have given up attempting? What makes him think that he can write Tragedy when it is generally acknowledged that our age is incapable of it? Why should he undertake to deal with man and the universe when the rest of us have decided to confine ourselves to man and society? Why should he defy the Gods when no one else raises his eyes above capitalism, communism, democracy, or the evils of racial discrimination? The other way of refusing to consider what he asks us to consider is to explain away both him and his plays. *Anna Christie* is "nothing but" a melodrama about a prostitute who tries to go straight. *Desire Under the Elms* is nothing but a dirty melodrama about Puritan repressions and Puritan lust *Strange Interlude* is nothing but an amateur attempt to exploit the popular interest in Freudianism

This season, and for the first time in many years, New York audiences have been offered an opportunity to see two of his major plays, *Anna Christie* and *Desire Under the Elms*, and thus to expose themselves to the experience which they afford Both received critical acclaim and attracted audiences sufficiently large to justify at least the kind of non-commercial productions which were given them But it is of course too soon to say whether or not this is the beginning of a more general recognition of O'Neill's claim to be regarded as our contribution to enduring dramatic literature. Many, perhaps most, writers destined to permanence go through a dubious period during which they have ceased to be contemporary but have not yet become established. Ibsen went through such a period during

which it seemed as though he might gradually recede until he had become a mere historical figure. Shaw stayed more continuously alive, but even in his case there was a time when it seemed possible to say that he had "outlived the day he was born too soon for." Yet that time was the time immediately before his sudden emergence into a popularity greater than any he enjoyed during what had seemed his heyday. Many works have been for a time merely outmoded before they came to be classic.

Whether or not O'Neill's appearance on Broadway for the first time in some years marks the beginning of a general revival, the two plays presented give a taste of his quality, and of the two *Desire Under the Elms* is more difficult either to dismiss or to misinterpret. *Anna Christie* can be taken as no more than a realistic if highly colored love story. *Desire Under the Elms* is preposterous unless it be taken as the Tragedy which was intended. It is a play about extraordinarily violent passions whose intensity is possible because they are assumed to arise not merely out of the relation of man to man but out of man's relation to two irrational forces—belief in the puritan God and a commitment to the land which is as irrational as the commitment to God. At the end O'Neill neatly defines the nature of the commitment to the land when the sheriff looks about at the scene of the tragedy and remarks "It's a jim dandy farm, no deny'n'. Wished I owned it!"

The chief significance of this remark does not lie in the irony of the wish to /30/ own something which has cursed the others who wished to own it. It lies in the fact that the sheriff has no conception of what owning or wanting to own meant to the protagonists in the drama. To him the farm represents merely having a negotiable cash value. It is a piece of saleable real estate. The use which he could have for it is a rational use. And therefore he could never own it or be owned by it in the sense that Eben and Abbie owned and were owned.

O'Neill is not defending or recommending the kind of relationship with either land or a puritan God which the Cabots had achieved or fallen victim to. He is saying merely that it is a type, as the ambiguous love of the sea in *Anna Christie* was also a type, of the kind of relationship to something outside one's self which makes for passions great enough to make tragedy possible. He is saying that it is from such things that the sorrows of our proud and angry dust arise and he is warning a complacent modern audience that it has not as permanently or as completely freed itself from them as it likes to think. In *Strange Interlude*, for example, Nina Leeds, a modern rationalist, falls similarly a victim to what she can call only her fixation. But whatever we call the irrational, it lies in wait for us.

At least one thing O'Neill will have achieved if he has achieved nothing else. He has won for the American dramatist the right to be as serious as he wants to be and to aim as high as he can. Whatever they may or may not think they learned from him, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, for example, have reason to be grateful. Because of his example it is no longer deemed necessarily absurd for a modern—and an American to boot—to aim high /78/

## REVIVAL AND REVALUATION: AFTER 1956

Though O'Neill had been dead scarcely three years before the sudden revival and revaluation of his literary merit, his re-emergence as a major force in American drama came almost a quarter of a century after the climax of his lifetime career. In death, therefore, O'Neill became as active a participant in the contemporary theatre as he had been at any time before. Within six years, seven of his plays were produced on and off Broadway, motion-picture versions were released, and plans were made for issuing his entire works on long-playing records. The return of Eugene O'Neill seemed permanently assured.

After the sensation of *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, producers quickly became aware of the potential of O'Neill as a theatre property, and as hitherto unstaged manuscripts became available, plays both old and new crowded into theatres. The first, a revival of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, was given an effective, if not wholly successful, performance and was followed by the cycle play, *A Touch of the Poet*, with a highly praised interpretation by one of the country's finest actresses, Helen Hayes.

Furthermore, the timeliness (or timelessness) of O'Neill's themes and style became immediately apparent when the revival of *The Great God Brown* demonstrated that he was as "far out" as many a present-day writer of "absurdist" traditions. There were failures, too, as always. *Diff'rent* did not succeed any better than when first produced, and the Lincoln Center Repertory Company's version of *Marco Millions* was not universally admired by any means. But once more the Circle in the Square gave O'Neill superb treatment with a highly regarded production of *Desire Under the Elms*, and the Actors Studio tackled *Strange Interlude* in its entirety with surprisingly happy results.

In addition to this theatrical rebirth, O'Neill became a subject of serious critical study outside the pages of newspapers and magazines. Doctoral dissertations, painstakingly researched biographies, and memories by those

who knew him and had lived with him emerged in quantity. As a subject of literary study, O'Neill became wholly "respectable", graduate seminars and undergraduate drama courses treated him on a level with Shaw, Ibsen, and Chekhov.

There could be no doubt that, whatever one might think of their literary and dramatic qualities, Eugene O'Neill's plays were a major segment of American letters and could not be disregarded. And, as had always been the case, one was forced to consider the plays, if only to demonstrate that they were not, really, worth consideration at all. O'Neill might not be wholly approved, but he could not, in any sense, remain ignored.

#### THE PLAYS AFTER 1956

*The significant events of this period were publications of hitherto unavailable plays and the production in Stockholm of two others that as of 1964 had not been done in this country.*

*In 1957 the Yale University Press brought out A Touch of the Poet, which was then produced on October 2, 1958, at the Helen Hayes Theatre, New York.*

*Hughie, a one-act monologue play that had apparently been completed but uncopyrighted in 1941, was performed on September 18, 1958, at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm and subsequently published by Yale in 1959. The play was part of a one-act series to be called By Way of Obit.*

*In 1960 the Yale University Library Gazette published the script of The Ancient Mariner, never before available.*

*On November 9, 1962, the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm produced a sharply edited version of the unfinished cycle play, More Stately Mansions, which was published in 1963 by the Yale University Press in an English translation of the original Swedish adaptation.*

#### REVIEWS

##### *A Moon for the Misbegotten*

*Tom Donnelly*

I assume that everyone who is seriously interested in the American theater will want to see Eugene O'Neill's last completed work, "A Moon for the Misbegotten" (at the Bijou). The serious theatergoer is warned: seeing it must be largely a labor of love.

"A Moon for the Misbegotten" is in its essentials a slight story, and there is a great disproportion between the content of it and the telling of it. James Tyrone Jr., who was modeled on O'Neill's older brother, and who appears with the shadow of doom already upon him in "Long Day's Journey Into Night," turns up again, older, more dissipated, all but destroyed.



In the climactic scene of the play Tyrone has a moment of truth. He has been indulging himself in cruel jokes, and "picking out the weakness in people" and sneering at them, but at last he reveals himself to Josie Hogan, the strapping daughter of a Connecticut tenant farmer. During the final two years of his mother's life Tyrone was her loyal and affectionate support. He stayed on the wagon for two years, not even a glass of beer. But just before his mother died she saw her son drunk again, unable to face losing her. "She closed her eyes so she couldn't see, and was glad to die."

And after that, when Tyrone brought his mother's body East, "to be buried beside the Old Man," he picked up a "50 buck a night blonde" on the funeral train. He had "some mad idea she could make me forget—what was in the baggage car ahead."

Josie downs her momentary feeling of revulsion. She loves Tyrone, and she has been presenting a false face to the world herself. Josie has been posing as a wanton. She has made herself the scandal of the neighborhood. But profane, ungainly Josie is an innocent, a softly feminine spirit trapped in a gross body. After his confession Tyrone falls asleep in her arms, chastely, on the shabby porch of the farmhouse. Josie knows that she cannot save Tyrone. "It's a fine end to all my scheming," she says, with a self-derisive smile, "to sit here with the dead hugged to my breast, and the silly mug of the moon grinning down, enjoying the joke!"

That is O'Neill's real story, simple, almost fragile, and enhanced by an awkward, driving compassion that has the feeling of poetry, even though the words lack the harmony of poetry. What he wants to say, O'Neill gets said, but in the process he comes close to smothering his deepest intention in a massive overlay of tedium. There is nothing in "A Moon for the Misbegotten" that calls for the epic, longer-than-three-hours treatment. Something small, with genuine quality, has been inflated and ornamented into something that is bulky, pretentious, or nearly that.

For long stretches at a time, as the central characters stand before their Connecticut farmhouse, the illusion that we are looking at tormented creatures of flesh and blood vanishes, and we see and hear only so many talking machines, whurring away against a painted background.

Surprisingly, it is well along in the evening, when he emerges as a recognizable later sketch of the man we have seen in "Long Day's Journey Into Night," that James Tyrone takes on any kind of theatrical or human dimension. Until then he is a shadowy figure, and it is hard to work up any interest in him. Part of the trouble is in performance. Franchot Tone is excellent in those final scenes. Earlier, he intensifies Tyrone's dullness, doing considerable damage to the hoped-for effect of a bitterly merry rogue ultimately unmasking.

Josie Hogan is another matter. She is the one big-scale portrait in the gallery, painfully, throbbingly, hopelessly alive. Wendy Hiller plays her with magnificent skill, and with great tenderness. A remarkable job of acting.

As Josie's father, the scheming and ferociously humorous Phil Hogan, Cyril Cusack is brilliant.

***A Moon for the Misbegotten***

*Richard Watts, Jr*

"A Moon for the Misbegotten" is another of Eugene O'Neill's dark and brooding contemplations of tormented souls. The last work of our great dramatist, it suffers from his characteristic failings of excessive length and insufficient eloquence, but, whatever its incidental weaknesses may be, it is a moving, beautiful and shattering play. Admirably enacted by Wendy Hiller, Franchot Tone and Cyril Cusack, its first local performance at the Bijou Theater last night was a haunting emotional experience and one of the memorable events of recent theatrical seasons.

It is a remarkable tribute to a playwright when the only possible current rivals to one of his dramas are a couple of his other works, and "A Moon for the Misbegotten" must inescapably be compared to "Long Day's Journey Into Night" and "The Iceman Cometh." There is no way of avoiding, or reason for denying, that his final play is the least satisfying of the three. In it, their faults unquestionably bulk larger. But this has little to do with the fact that, after "A Moon for the Misbegotten" has managed its occasionally tedious beginning, it is overwhelming.

The chief comparison, of course, must be to "Long Day's Journey," since one of the trio of central characters in the drama which opened last night is the James Tyrone Jr. who is the sad and dissolute older brother of the author in the autobiographical play. Here he is some years older and has been driven farther along his alcoholic path by the death of his mother. A bitter and deeply tormented man, who longs for his own death, he has fallen in love with a great hulk of a woman, but both of them realize that he is already a corpse and no romance is possible.

O'Neill plays have a manner of smoldering slowly and then bursting into dramatic flames, and here the smoldering takes much longer and the flames are less frequent. Once they have arrived, they are tremendous, but the unfortunate part of the periods of marking time between outbursts of fire is that they make the dramatist's known weakness, the inability of his prose style to rise to the heights of his imaginative lyric conceptions, too evident. So "A Moon for the Misbegotten" has its languors. They seem unimportant, though, when the high points are reached.

Although there are two minor characters in the play, it is chiefly concerned with three figures, and they are studied with superb insight and compassion. They are, in addition to the doomed Tyrone, the giant of a woman, who pretends that she is a wanton because she wants to conceal her innocence and goodness, and her old Irish father, who is capable of any guile to protect his land and his daughter. Even O'Neill has written few more moving scenes than the climactic one between the girl and the drunken James, and it is unforgettable in its power and pity.

Wendy Hiller, who plays the girl, may not meet O'Neill's demands for physical bulk in the role, but she plays so beautifully that this becomes un-

important Years after he deserved to be, Franchot Tone has come to be accepted as one of the ablest of American actors, but he has never been so brilliant as he is in the magnificent part of the lost alcoholic And Cyril Cusack, one of the most talented of contemporary Irish actors, is splendid as the father "A Moon for the Misbegotten" is further proof that Eugene O'Neill was one of the titans of the theater

### *A Touch of the Poet*

*Brooks Atkinson*

Given Eugene O'Neill and a cast of superb actors, the effect on the stage is electric

The play is "A Touch of the Poet," put on last evening at the refurbished Helen Hayes Theatre. The principal actors are Miss Hayes, Eric Portman, Kim Stanley and Betty Field O'Neill used to feel that his dramas seldom or never had the force on the stage that he had imagined when he wrote them

If he could have seen the stunning performance that Harold Clurman has directed, it is possible that for once he might have been satisfied For the performance fits the play exactly And the performance includes the sort of inspired group acting that our theatre is seldom able to provide

"A Touch of the Poet" is the fifth play in the projected cycle of eleven plays that O'Neill was never able to finish. The cycle was to record 175 years in the life of an American family—"A Tale of the Possessors Self-Dispossessed" being the over-all theme "A Touch of the Poet" is set in a gloomy tavern near Boston in 1828, and it has some bearing on the assimilation of European ideas in the business-like democracy of America

Even without the general theme, you would recognize "A Touch of the Poet" as an O'Neill play A hot-blooded Irish father, a submissive wife, a scornful, rebellious child, orotund talk, an abundance of drink and—most characteristic of all—gaudy illusions, pipe-dreams, a deluge of silly, romantic fantasies, these constitute the hallmark of an O'Neill drama They characterized his first plays They had become almost an obsession in the plays he was working on at the end of his career.

In "A Touch of the Poet" the father is a braggart, tyrannical Irishman who fancies himself a gentleman and a soldier who won signal honors on the battlefield from the Duke of Wellington. Everyone else knows that he is a drunken, meddlesome, lazy fraud. Certainly, his daughter does She is in love with the son of a rich Yankee tradesman who is ill in a bedroom in the inn kept by her father Her father regards the Yankees as beneath him He is astonished to find that the Yankees regard him and his daughter as trash

Since no one is killed or dies in the play, "A Touch of the Poet" is not a typical O'Neill tragedy The tragedy is confined to the destruction of a braggart's pride But it has the size and tumult, the clash of purpose, the bigness of scene writing, the bitterness, the hatred, the recklessness of

O'Neill's most theatrical writing. It is characteristically overwritten and drama on a big scale.

Inside the shadowy, raw-timbered tavern room that Ben Edwards has beautifully designed, the performance has the power of an epic. Mr. Clurman has made a thunderbolt out of O'Neill's writing.

Every actor is at the top of his form. As the braggart Irishman, Mr. Portman is frequently inarticulate. And that is unfortunate. For his portrait of the bogus gentleman whose pride takes a disastrous fall is masterly in concept and in the wildness of emotion. Miss Field gives a nicely balanced performance as a witty, sagacious Yankee lady whose gentility makes an amusing contrast with the violence of the other characters.

"A Touch of the Poet" brings us the two finest actresses of their respective generations as mother and daughter. This is not the time to discover Miss Hayes' genius, it has been happily familiar for years. But the shrunken, shabby biddy she plays here seems like a fresh discovery because it is so marvelously wrought in frailty, brightness, quickness of instinct, physical vulgarity and spiritual beauty.

Nor does Miss Stanley's vividness of communication come as a surprise. She has been a fresh and creative actress for a number of seasons. But the fullness of her characterization, the tempestuousness of her emotions, the interior life of the character as well as its external expression represent Miss Stanley well on into an extraordinary career.

There is one scene toward the end of the play that Miss Hayes and Miss Stanley have made a classic. Mother and daughter alone in the night in the dining-room of the inn, drawn together, absorbed by each other, yet thinking different thoughts—it is a scene that is alive, profound and unforgettable.

O'Neill wrote it. Like the rest of "A Touch of the Poet," it has substance, a point of view, human principle and theatre.

### ***A Touch of the Poet***

*John McClain*

"A Touch of the Poet," which opened at the handsomely renovated Helen Hayes Theatre last night is not one of Eugene O'Neill's great plays, but even as one of his lesser ones it proves again that he is majestically alone in the American theatre. One is apt to forget his extraordinary talents—the great gift of drawing characters in depth, then pitting them one against the other with all nerves exposed.

This latest of his posthumous works to be offered in America is first of all a searing character study. There is the cruel and sodden ex-officer in the British Army who is operating a tavern in the vicinity of Boston, circa 1828. He lives in a drunken dream of past glories and a gentility to which he was not born.

There is his wife, the adoring biddy he plucked from the peat bogs of his

native Ireland Her fierce devotion remains constant through all his tirades against the immigrant poor and the rising commercial aristocracy of the New World, neither of which class will accept him

There is his daughter, resentful of his swaggering deceit, yet strangely possessed of the same pride which provokes it

And there is the mother of a young man whose roots are deep in America, who is fighting for the survival of her son in a new society which has little use for the poetic postures of the Old World.

Finally, there is the young man He never appears onstage, but he is the voice of a thoughtful and awakened new land

These characters are created with intensity and full dimension, and we are immediately caught by them When they are finally brought to grips we are transported by the conflict between father and daughter, his insane reaction to the patronizing Yankee mother and his abortive attempt to engage her husband in a duel

In a gentler mood we are moved by the off-stage romance of the daughter and the poetic young man, the unreasoning love of the mother for both her husband and daughter. And the final moments in which the father, at long last, gives up his losing battle

That it is not a much greater play is due to the fact that the people themselves, however accurately painted, are not very sympathetic

The father is an impossible fake and a bore, the mother is just plain stupid, the daughter is humorless and nagging.

But against this you have the author's magnificent skill in the construction of scenes like the one in which the daughter is trying to tell her mother that she has that night been deflowered while the mother, reverting to type, is only preoccupied with what she hopes her husband has done to the police. Them dirty rats!

Helen Hayes quite blissfully runs away with the honors as the dedicated and long-suffering mother, easily transcending the fact that her dedication out-runs reality

Eric Portman, regrettably, does not give one of his greatest performances as the Major, merely because he could not always be understood. His words climbed on top of one another, but even so it is a brilliant conception and will doubtless be corrected in time to come

Kim Stanley is excellent in her inimitable manner, and Betty Field has a long scene as the mother of the off-scene lover which is brilliant And don't forget Curt Conway, it says here on my cuff.

Harold Clurman, who directed, has done so with a notable lack of ostentation, and Ben Edwards's set of an early American tavern will whet the appetites of many antique dealers. Just take the glassware—.

Once more Mr O'Neill makes everybody else look silly.

## ***The Great God Brown***

*Brooks Atkinson*

Although "The Great God Brown" was originally produced in 1926, it remains as avant-garde as any play of the century. Beckett and Ionesco have gone no further afield.

In 1926 Eugene O'Neill was in the midst of an experimental period when he was trying to create a technique that would express what lies beneath the surface of life as well as what everyone can see. To express, also, the different appearances one person can have in the presence of other persons.

In form there is nothing today more modern than "The Great God Brown." In content, it remains the essence of O'Neill—loneliness, brooding on the meaning of life, a yearning for identity, love and recognition.

The impression of modernity derives in large part from the brilliance of the production that opened last evening at the Coronet. Stuart Vaughan, artistic director of the Phoenix Theatre, has staged a superb performance with actors who compose the nucleus of the Phoenix permanent company. (Since the Phoenix Theatre in Second Avenue is now tenanted by "Once Upon a Mattress," the Phoenix troupe has moved uptown for its opening production of the season. The organization is the same. It happens to be temporarily away from home.)

The journey has been profitable for the subscribers as well as the Phoenix. Given an exceedingly difficult script with an ambiguous third act, Mr. Vaughan has set a spectral mood with Will Steven Armstrong's scenery and David Amram's weird score but chiefly by means of some admirable actors. Fritz Weaver, Robert Lansing, Nan Martin and Gerry Jedd will probably never have more elusive characters to play. If they do, they will never play them more eloquently.

"The Great God Brown" is O'Neill's drama of masks. When Dion Anthony wears his society mask, Margaret loves him, and so does his chum Billy Brown. But the unmasked Dion is a different character—rebellious, searching, melancholy, lost. When he is without his mask, Margaret is terrified.

This notion of multiple personalities in a single character is the entrance into a fascinating fantasy. It is the device O'Neill used to explore the dark labyrinth of life in which we are all strangers, reaching out toward one another but never really meeting.

For two acts, "The Great God Brown" is vividly unearthly. The changing, painful relationships among the characters are both logical and illuminating. They do explain, in O'Neill's terms, why people suffer. But it seems to this theatregoer that the third act goes off the deep end. The complexity of the relationship becomes more mathematical than human, and the final tragedy is a battle of wraiths. The blood is drained out of the conclusion.

Whether "The Great God Brown" is or is not entirely successful is a pedantic problem. Why haggle over degrees of perfection? For the dramatic

conception is bold and original, and some of the writing has that haunting aspiration characteristic of O'Neill when he was struggling to explain the inexplicable. In the theatre his power of introspection is magnetic.

And the incantation of the Phoenix performance is reason enough for rejoicing. Mr Weaver, winding his way through the bitter moods of Dion, Mr Lansing, beginning quietly as Billy Brown, but gathering force as he goes along and finally duplicating the passionate desperation of Dion, Miss Jeddo, plain and compassionate as Cybel, understanding without taking pride in understanding, Miss Martin, anxious, loving, alert, patient, uneasy as the wife and mother—these are brilliant portraits of difficult characters.

Unfortunately, most of the speaking is in too low a key. If the actors are difficult to hear in the front rows, they must be totally unintelligible farther from the stage. It would be a pity not to correct this trouble quickly and totally. For in the visualization of O'Neill's thesis, in tonal emphases and sureness of outline this is the Phoenix' finest production.

Avant-garde of 1926 is avant-garde today. O'Neill was writing about ideas that are permanent.

### ***Diff'rent***

*Howard Taubman*

What a keen observer and acute psychologist Eugene O'Neill was! More than forty years ago, in a play called "Diff'rent," he brought to agonized life a woman betrayed by her repressions. In its perception his work presaged the explorations of some of our ablest contemporary playwrights.

Not that "Diff'rent," which was revived last night at the new and cheerful little Mermaid Theatre, is a fully realized, wholly satisfying play. It has flaws. But when it gets to the substance of its theme in the second act, it is unsparing in its honesty, penetrating in its grasp of character and touching in its sympathy.

The chief fault of this early play is its skimpy exposition. Since O'Neill was to become the playwright who developed his work at monumental length, there is a retrospective irony in the bareness of the preparation here. But he must have learned from this piece, which thus provides a rewarding glimpse into his growth.

The premise of "Diff'rent" is that Emma Crosby, about 18 and in love with a sturdy young whaling captain, rejects him because he has had a brief, accidental affair with a native girl on a South Sea island. Having assumed that he was "diff'rent," she cannot forgive his transgression. Such behavior seems terribly dated today. But one does not fault O'Neill for using it. One complains only of his failure to dig more deeply than he does into the girl's character and motivation at this point.

But when he moves into the vital action thirty years later, in 1920, O'Neill is not wanting. We encounter Emma at a moment when she has brightened

her home with new furniture, drapes and curtains. We see her in a flowered chiffon gown, rouged, dyed and bespangled with strings of beads, rings, earrings and bracelets. She is a pathetic caricature of a belle of the Twenties.

In a scene of charged intensity, O'Neill shows Emma seeking to be coy and attractive to her former fiancé's nephew, a young soldier who is as sneaky and corrupt as the uncle is upstanding. The insight into the hysterical urges of a neurotic woman is deep. It is even possible to believe that O'Neill sensed not only Emma's need for sensual expression but also for further vengeance. For this is the faithful captain's ultimate humiliation.

The end is catastrophic and somewhat melodramatic. O'Neill was not one to blink at a violent conclusion, although he contrived usually to have it happen offstage. The final moments of "Different" [*sic*] now seem corny but do not diminish the impact of the powerful second act.

Paul Shyre, who has been Sean O'Casey's loyal advocate, has turned to O'Neill with equal dedication. He has staged a performance of increasing tension. From the curtain's first parting, on Boyd Dumrose's apt set, when the captain and Emma are discovered sitting upright in a narrow love seat like figures in a rigid portrait, Mr. Shyre catches O'Neill's mood.

Although it is off Broadway, the cast need not ask for quarter. Marian Seldes suggests more of Emma's outraged romanticism in the first act than O'Neill explains, and in her desperation and vulnerability thirty years later she is deeply affecting. Michael Higgins as the captain and Robert Drivas as the young soldier are first rate, and the others honorably handle briefer roles.

Despite some stilted dialogue and old-fashioned theatricalism, "Different" remains valid in its probing into the secret places of the mind.

### ***Desire Under the Elms***

*Howard Taubman*

If you think that Eugene O'Neill's "Desire Under the Elms" is old-fashioned and creaky, go down to Bleecker Street, in Greenwich Village. The revival unveiled last night by the Circle In The Square has a tension and passion rarely found in our frequently attenuated theatre.

Essentially this is an elementary story. Its triangle and its scenes of seduction, festivity and murder are so simple and bare that at first blush they seem rudimentary like the play of a naive writer working a rustic vein. But thanks to his flaming sincerity, O'Neill turns his material into elemental drama.

Approached as it is without a trace of condescension, the play turns out to have a granitic power that reflects its rocky New England setting. Jose Quintero, who has repeatedly proved his sympathy for O'Neill, has directed this revival as if the play had never been done before.



Sharing the honors with Mr Quintero are Colleen Dewhurst and George C. Scott. Both have the technical range as actors and the inner resources of intensity to make their roles ring with truth.

Mr. Scott brings the required harshness and cruelty to the character of Ephraim Cabot, the fierce, flinty septuagenarian who has forced the grudging New England soil to yield fruit, but who has not been softened by age or man.

Miss Dewhurst plays Abbie, the woman seeking a refuge and a home, with admirable richness of development. From the moment that old Ephraim brings her to the farm and she stares with icy contempt at his loutish elder sons until she leaves it, destroyed, yet touched by the tenderness of love, her performance has searching light and shade.

In the third vital role, Rip Torn cannot match his colleagues' technique and fire. He looks the part of Eben, and when the young man moons like a calf he conveys a sense of callowness. But there is something strangely hollow about his performance, particularly his voice, whenever he is required to reach into deeper areas of feeling.

The extensive open playing space, sparingly set by David Hays, conveys the impression of greater reality than do decors with an abundance of furnishing and details.

With the help of Mr. Quintero's staging and by the absorption of the performers, including Lou Frizzell and Clifford A. Pellow as the elder sons and a group of cheerful guests at Ephraim's party, one feels the sweep of a hilly landscape, and the resistance of the stony soil and the brutal inbred lives.

The Circle In The Square reminds us once again how cavalier the American theatre has been with its own accumulated wealth.

### ***Marco Millions and Strange Interlude***

*Howard Taubman*

Early in 1928 two of Eugene O'Neill's plays opened on Broadway. "Marco Millions" with Alfred Lunt as Marco Polo, the eternal, go-getting Philistine, expired after three weeks. "Strange Interlude," with Lynn Fontanne as Nina Leeds, the neurotic female who dominates a variety of men, ran for 17 months.

Since it is always open season for second-guessing the past, it is a fair question to ask how wise and just was the public of the twenties in its evaluation of the two plays.

By great good luck we are in a position to consider the two O'Neill plays from the perspective of the theater as well as the printed page. Last March the Actors Studio Theater began its formal activities with a production of "Strange Interlude." Now the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center has

mounted a colorful revival of "Marco Millions" as the second production of its first season in the inviting new ANTA Washington Square Theater

My first conclusion is that "Marco Millions" is a good deal more interesting than a meager three-week run would suggest and that "Strange Interlude" is less impressive than its thundering success in 1928 would imply

My second observation is that neither work ranks with the best of O'Neill: "Mourning Becomes Electra," "The Iceman Cometh" and "Long Day's Journey Into Night"

My third finding is that "Marco Millions" has dated much less than "Strange Interlude"

To make these judgments today is not to smirk patronizingly at the twenties. Audiences then had their reasons and excuses for reacting as they did. "Marco Millions," which I did not get to see, was handicapped, we have been told, by a production that cut and marred the play. "Strange Interlude," which I did see, was dazzlingly produced and performed.

"Strange Interlude," moreover, was the vogue drama of 1928 and 1929. Its inordinate nine-act length, which was supposed to be a handicap, turned out to be an asset. It became *chi-chi* to attend a performance that began at cocktail time and provided for a long dinner intermission. If you want a notion of how fashionable, some of the swells at the opening wore street clothes for the first half and returned in dinner jackets and evening gowns for the second.

Both plays are undermined by weakness of characterization. The deficiency is more harmful to "Strange Interlude," for its entire purpose is to probe into the secret corners of human hearts. "Marco Millions" mounts a blunderbuss of an attack against the materialism of the West and does not pretend to be a searching development of character.

As a gargantuan dramatic exercise in a species of psychoanalysis, "Strange Interlude," it is clear now, is fatally flawed by the incredibility of its central character. Nina lacks the stature and fascination to be daughter, sweetheart, wife, mother and mistress to so many different men.

The motive O'Neill adduces for her devouring drive—that she never forgave her father or the world for the unfulfillment of her love for a young aviator who was killed—is patently unconvincing. Nor can one believe, no matter how alluringly Nina is embodied by a Lynn Fontanne or a Geraldine Page, that Sam Evans, the good, foolish husband, Darrell, the passionate, noble lover, and Marsden, the bloodless, constant admirer, behave as anything other than creatures of the playwright's will.

As for the drama's advanced form, once a famous talking point, it now seems pretentious and archaic. The asides, which the characters speak to reveal their buried thoughts, are banal and ludicrous, for they tell us nothing not made clear by the action and the normal dialogue.

Yet "Strange Interlude" was worth reviving. Whatever his failings, O'Neill remains one of our leading playwrights. A new generation has a right to meet his work on the stage as well as on the printed page, where it is more

accessible but not nearly so compelling. For O'Neill felt, thought and wrote for the stage, not for the library.

The most memorable moment in "Strange Interlude" is a triumph of theater magic. It comes at the end of the sixth act. Nina is at the zenith of her power over her three men. There is a respite from the stresses of their tense relationships. On the surface all is tranquility, but there is an undercurrent of brooding and contemplation in the men as they surround Nina. Her unspoken, conquering exultation, heightened by word that still another male, her son, waits for her, enriches a subtle counterpoint of moods expected in irresistible stage motifs.

Once the characters in "Marco Millions" are established, they hardly change. For a moment Marco as a youth senses, however callowly, a possibility of poetry and beauty. But he quickly learns to accept the values of men of affairs and transforms himself into a prototype of the noisy, self-satisfied chap on the make, and he remains unchanged despite a last glimpse of inexpressible ecstasy in Princess Kukachin's yearning eyes.

The Princess and the exemplars of ancient Eastern wisdom, her grandfather, Kublai, the great Khan, and Chu-Yin, the Cathayan sage—also remain largely untransformed. For "Marco Millions" is preoccupied with satire and spectacle.

The attack on materialistic standards is savage as well as heavy-handed. What O'Neill said was obvious then as now, it was also pertinent and still is.

In the treatment of an exotic atmosphere "Marco Millions" is evocative. O'Neill rejoiced in being an alchemist of words, action, setting, costume and music, and in "Marco Millions" he attempted a stage mixture of mood and comment.

But here, alas, as in his finest plays, the impulse of his language to soar was frustrated. Poetry was not his forte, nor wit. His intensity of commitment, his courage to dig deeply into human motives and his affinity for the stage were the sources of O'Neill's strength, and these endure.

#### GENERAL CRITICISM

##### ***"Why the O'Neill Star Is Rising"***

*Joseph Wood Krutch*

At the present moment Eugene O'Neill's popularity and his reputation are greater than at any time since the early Thirties. Both declined during the playwright's last years when no new works appeared, when none was successfully revived, and when some critics—especially those who had relatively little interest in the theatre—maintained that time had disposed of what they had always regarded as an unjustified reputation.

After O'Neill's death in 1953, popular interest and critical estimates reversed themselves sharply and suddenly. In the last few years a number of

O'Neill's plays have been revived with striking success—notably "The Iceman Cometh," first off Broadway and more recently on television. His "Long Day's Journey Into Night" won international acclaim before receiving its Pulitzer award-winning posthumous production here. Today it can hardly be denied that, by common consent, O'Neill is re-established as the American playwright most likely to maintain his position in both the living theatre and dramatic history.

O'Neill was the first American dramatist ever to win a solid international reputation. He still holds it today, but he is no longer alone. At least three or four of his younger compatriots are as highly regarded in Europe as any other living playwright.

Is he, nevertheless, still unique in certain respects; and if so why? What are the qualities which distinguish him? Is he more nearly a classic than any of the others can yet be said to be?

The test of years is of course important. O'Neill had his first production in 1916, or nearly half a century ago, and a whole generation has passed since the last of his indisputably major works, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," was written. Time is, moreover, not measured merely in years. It has moved very fast since 1916, perhaps even faster since 1941. We are separated from O'Neill by events which have changed the whole look of the world and its prospects, created an entirely new atmosphere of intellectual and artistic endeavor, and generated new attitudes and new styles.

There are half a dozen playwrights now active whose positions are roughly comparable to what his was in the Twenties and early Thirties. The two Americans—Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams—who have won international reputations did so somewhat more quickly than he and they are in debt, if only because he won for American dramatists the right to aspire as high as they can. But neither Miller nor Williams is "like him" in tone, mood, method or philosophy. Even less similar are the most discussed Europeans. Anouilh, Beckett, Ionesco and the other French and English writers lumped together as part of "the new wave."

Many members of the audiences which applaud the revivals of O'Neill's plays were born too late to have known the times in which he lived and for which he wrote. He is a voice from the past. To many of them it must seem that his disillusion and his "alienation" are of so innocently old-fashioned a kind that he barely escapes being that most contemptible of creatures, a "square." But the fact that he has come to seem of the past without being passé is the best proof that he was "not for a day but for"—well, for at least more than a day.

✓ What is the quality which is uniquely his? O'Neill did not find himself at once He was extremely prolific and extremely uneven. Many of his works, especially the earlier ones, reveal the special preoccupations of his day—for instance, the rather vague, unfocused social and political radicalism of the intellectual of the Twenties and, of course, popular Freudianism. But the core is Tragedy in the sense of that word which never really changes, which is outside time, and persists despite all fluctuations in the degree to which

men or society feel themselves prosperous or depressed, successful or unsuccessful

What is this thing called Tragedy with a capital T? No formal literary question has been more discussed during the past 2,500 years but most definitions go back to Aristotle. He described it as the story of a "noble" man, neither villainous nor perfectly virtuous, who is defeated, but not wholly subdued, by something too large for him to cope with. Such a story, he thought, could be recognized by its effect, which is "to purge the soul by pity and terror."

In recent times this last phrase "to purge the soul" has sometimes been given a Freudian interpretation. Sometimes, also, an attempt has been made to say that a "modern" as opposed to an ancient Tragedy should deal with the malfunctioning of "society" rather than with "fate" as the force which defeats the hero. But the result of such revisions is to change the effect of the work which then arouses protest instead of purging the soul.

Such a work may be, if you think so, "better" or "more useful," but it does not produce the same esthetic and emotional effect.

For a tragedy to purge the soul, the hero cannot be "a little man." He must be a great one who somehow represents an intimation at least of the nobility of which human nature is capable. We may pity him but that pity must be for strength defeated, not for weakness. He must seem to illustrate some irremediable rather than some remediable aspect of the human situation. No other American writer for the stage has so constantly produced plays which so closely approximate the Aristotelian ideal.

At first sight it may seem strange that our most imposing tragic writer should have arisen and flourished during a decade which was superficially complacent and optimistic. The Twenties constituted that other "new era" during which prosperity was supposed to have become permanent at last. Even to the revolutionists of that day, revolution was a clearer simpler hope than it is to their present-day counterparts, and the new Freudian-tinged freedom seemed to offer a solution to personal as well as social problems.

But the paradox of Tragedy in an age of optimism is only a paradox. Did not the two great ages of tragic writing coincide with those of expanding hopes? Periclean Greece and Elizabethan /36/ England were both eras when men's worldly hopes rode highest and when the world seemed indefinitely expanding. Shakespeare and Sophocles were, like O'Neill, the children of an age of optimism. And it is exactly when only the most fundamental questions seem unanswered that they are most insistently asked. Then the answer seems to be the answer of A. E. Housman: "The troubles of our proud and angry dust / Are from eternity, and shall not fail."<sup>1</sup> That is certainly O'Neill's answer.

Yet in O'Neill as in Sophocles and, even more strikingly, in Shakespeare something tonic remains. The truly tragic predicament is a dignified predicament. The human spirit which is great, free and unconquered remains

<sup>1</sup>From *Last Poems*, IX — Ed

Man believes in himself if he believes in nothing else. Tragic despair is not nihilistic despair

To define O'Neill's tragic spirit thus is to explain why his plays have remained meaningful in a world which has changed greatly. But that is not the whole story. His voice is not merely still meaningful, it is uniquely so. No subsequent American, and perhaps no subsequent European, playwright has stated the case for the truly tragic view of life so convincingly or offered in its place anything so satisfactory or so tonic.

Where O'Neill is tragic, the present generation tends to be merely angry, troubled, or blankly despairing. To call the roll of the playwrights taken most seriously today is to see at once the ways in which each of them produces a quite different effect and fails to meet the need which O'Neill once met and evidently continues to meet.

What is the radically different effect which these more recent and equally serious writers create? How do they differ from O'Neill?

These questions cannot be answered in quite the same terms for all of them. They are most difficult in the case of Arthur Miller, the first of the two Americans who most clearly invites comparison. His first successful play, "All My Sons," was produced during the season 1946-47. It is essentially an exposé of the corruption characteristic of the "the war effort," as the political left regarded it. Like all Miller's plays, it escaped the limitations of mere "social criticism," but social criticism was its most obvious concern and it has remained such to some extent in all his work. He chose to adapt Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People" in such a way as to make it what the original clearly was not—namely, "social protest" from the point of view of the modern political radical.

Even the most discussed work, "Death of a Salesman," can be interpreted as "social protest" rather than tragedy, since Tragedy in the classic sense insists that the universe rather than society is the ultimate cause of the human predicament. And yet, despite this emphasis, Miller is in one important respect closer to O'Neill than any of his leading contemporaries. He seems, like O'Neill, to believe in the essential worth and dignity of man.

Tennessee Williams is much more difficult to interpret—so difficult indeed that two spectators can seldom agree as to "what he means." In one way or another he has hinted more than once that he is really "on the side of the angels" and his most recent play, "Period of Adjustment," is indeed relatively cheerful. /108/ But he had previously dealt so persistently with sick souls as to create the impression that to be human is, in his view, necessarily to be sick in one way or another. His characters seemed to be involved in what one is inclined to call not a "tragic predicament" but rather an unsavory mess, and his plays are tolerable—fascinating even—chiefly because of his enormous talent for story-telling in the dramatic form.

It is a commonplace that O'Neill was often clumsy; that he had more genius than talent; that the sincerity and depth of his passion triumphed over the deficiency of his technique. Williams on the other hand is, of all the contemporary playwrights, American or European, perhaps the one most

generously gifted with the very talents in which O'Neill was deficient. Hardly has the curtain risen on one of his plays before one finds one's self transported into the world of his characters, taking their reality for granted. The effect is hypnotic. Like the victim of the Ancient Mariner's spell, one cannot choose but hear.

Williams, Anouilh, Beckett, Genet and Ionesco share with each other, but not with either O'Neill or Miller, an attitude which appears to be both a despair of human nature itself and a moral nihilism. They differ from one another within the framework of this general attitude.

Anouilh is bitterly cynical in a fashion which relates him more clearly than any of the others to a tradition of worldliness older even than La Rochefoucauld. The others are not so much worldly as "out-of-this-worldly." To them, man is not merely egotistical, treacherous and cruel, he is also so "absurd" that he cannot be rationally presented and is to be truly revealed only as a figure in a surrealist nightmare. No God or Godot for whom he waits will ever come.

In those Nineteen Twenties which now seem so innocent, O'Neill was sometimes accused of being "obsessed with sex," especially in its more tortured and least respectable aspects. By comparison with even Williams to say nothing of Jean Genet his characters are normal and clean.

A Genet, an Ionesco or a Williams gives the impression that normal sexual love, no matter how passionate, or defiant of the conventional rules of manners or morals, is mere pap for babes, and that sex is interesting only when it is perverse—either sadistic or at least homosexual.

If Williams makes O'Neill seem almost naively conventional, Genet makes Williams seem hardly less so. He is perhaps the only famous French man of letters since the Marquis de Sade to have a long police record for criminal sexual offenses. His play, "The Maids," is a tissue of perversities.

If all this were mere decadence, as it may be in the case of Genet, one would neither take it seriously nor be especially concerned about its effect. Both literature and society have survived many waves of decadence. But Williams and Beckett are among the most serious and the most talented dramatic writers of our time. The latter gives dramatic expression to an atheistic existentialism which cannot, like the beatniks' Zen Buddhism, be dismissed as affectation.

Thus the difference between O'Neill and the most serious dramatists of the Nineteen Fifties is more than a matter of changing literary fashions. Tragedy is tonic, nihilism is deadening. O'Neill repeatedly claims Strindberg as his master and seems frequently to echo the refrain of Strindberg's "The Dream Play": "Men are pitiable creatures." But there is a vast difference between the pitiable and the contemptible.

It is true that O'Neill himself came at moments perilously close to nihilism. It might be argued that "The Iceman Cometh" merely states in rather crude terms the nihilistic thesis of Beckett. But his best and most characteristic plays owe their tension to the fact that they assert rather than deny the ultimate worth, dignity, fortitude, and hope of man. He, like the heroes

of Shakespeare, may suffer defeat complete enough to make him doubt the meaning of the universe, but this does not destroy his faith that his own struggle makes his life meaningful <sup>1</sup>

Should a new dramatist capable of expressing the enduring tragic spirit in terms more powerful than his appear on the world stage, O'Neill might become another Marlowe who foretold a new Shakespeare. On the other hand, if nihilistic despair comes to dominate the imagination of the future so completely that Tragedy, in the older sense, seems a product of naive delusion, then he would become only a historical curiosity. But if the near future does not produce a more powerful tragic writer and if nihilism fails to triumph utterly, the plays of O'Neill should continue to hold an important place in the international dramatic repertory.

It would have astonished the Twenties to be told that forty years later one of O'Neill's great attractions would be the consolation he offers. But one can state an important fact even more simply. O'Neill's plays owe some of their present popularity to the fact that, by comparison with many others more recent, they are cheerful. /111/



# AIDS TO FURTHER STUDY

## A SHORT CHRONOLOGY OF THE LIFE OF EUGENE O'NEILL

1888 Born in New York on October 16 Father Irish-born James O'Neill, famous throughout America in title role of *The Count of Monte Cristo* Mother Ellen (or Ella) Quinlan O'Neill, quiet, beautiful, artistic, born in Connecticut

1888-1895 Traveled with parents on road tours to important cities all over the United States

1896-1906 Attended various private schools in New York and Connecticut Entered Princeton University in September 1906 After two-week disciplinary suspension for vandalism and subsequent reinstatement, voluntarily left the following spring without completing first year

1907-1908 While living in New York, worked for third-rate mail-order house in which James O'Neill had financial interest Meanwhile, "did the town" with brother James, ten years his senior

1909 Impulsively married Kathleen Jenkins, daughter of a once-wealthy New York family, in October Within a very few days, James O'Neill sent him to Honduras on a gold prospecting tour Contracted malaria, found no gold

1910 Returned shortly before birth of son Eugene Gladstone, Jr., on May 5 (O'Neill did not meet him until nearly twelve years later because the boy was raised as the son of Kathleen's second husband) After brief tour with James O'Neill's road company, shipped from Boston on Norwegian square-rigger Jumped ship in Buenos Aires Took jobs with Westinghouse, Swift and Company, and Singer Sewing Machine Was fired by (or quit) each in succession within a matter of weeks Subsequently shipped as seaman on cattle boat to Durban, South Africa, returning to South America and living nearly destitute along waterfront

1911 Returned to New York in May as ordinary seaman aboard British tramp steamer Lived in destitution in \$3.00-a-month room at Jimmy the Priest's dive in New York, surviving on whiskey, free lunch, and father's allowance Shipped as able seaman to Liverpool and back in July and August Resumed aimless life in Greenwich Village

1912 Lived during summer with family at New London, Connecticut, the time and setting of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* Worked as cub reporter on the *Telegraph*, and ran a column of poetry, often maintained by his own contributions Divorced by Kathleen Jenkins in October Health broken, entered Gaylord Farm tuberculosis sanitarium, Wallingford, Connecticut, on December 24 While a patient there, began serious reading of plays, especially Strindberg

1913-1914 After discharge from sanitarium in May 1913, lived in New London boarding house on Long Island Sound while health mended Began serious writing of one-act plays In August 1914, Gorham Press, Boston, published *Thirst and Other One-Act Plays* at James O'Neill's personal expense of \$1000 Enrolled that September in George Pierce Baker's playwriting course at Harvard

1915 After leaving Harvard in the spring, lived in New York on father's ten-dollar weekly allowance at Golden Swan bar, popularly known as "The Hell Hole," frequented by political radicals and underworld characters

1916. Moved in summer to Provincetown, Massachusetts, haven for artists and not yet a tourist attraction Continued to write short plays Newly formed Provincetown Players successfully produced *Bound East for Cardiff* in their 50 by 100 foot Wharf Theatre During winter, Provincetown Players organized Playwrights' Theatre in converted brownstone house on Lower Manhattan and staged season of one-act plays by O'Neill and others

1917-1918 Continued to write steadily in Provincetown and Greenwich Village Met Agnes Boulton, handsome 24-year-old widow from Connecticut, author of short stories and pulp fiction Married on April 12, 1918 Resided at her former home in West Point Pleasant, New Jersey, during winter

1919 Moved from New Jersey into remodeled former Coast Guard station on Peaked Hill Bars, Provincetown. House very remote from town, could be reached only on foot or horseback over dunes. Son Shane born on October 30.

1920 First major New York production, *Beyond the Horizon*, won him Pulitzer Prize in June. His father, James O'Neill, died on August 10.

1921-1925 Lived in New York, then at Brook Farm in Ridgefield, Connecticut, in winters, at Peaked Hill Bars in summers. Met Eugene, Jr., nearly twelve years old, early in 1922. Mother, Ellen Quinlan O'Neill, died in Los Angeles on February 28. Pulitzer Prize awarded for *Anna Christie* in May. In December 1924, moved to Bermuda, where daughter Oona was born on May 13 of following year.

1926 Resided in summer at Belgrade Lakes, Maine. Began acquaintance with Carlotta Monterey, who had appeared in a production of *The Hairy Ape*. Also resided at Brook Farm, Connecticut, and Spithead, Bermuda, a large nineteenth-century estate.

1927-1928 During trips to New York for various rehearsals, resumed acquaintance with Carlotta Monterey. In late 1928, embarked on round-the-world trip, for reasons that remain obscure. Probable explanation was decision to leave family in Bermuda and marry Miss Monterey. Pulitzer Prize awarded for *Strange Interlude* in May 1928.

1929-1931 Took up residence in France in January 1929. Divorced following July by Agnes Boulton and immediately married Carlotta Monterey. Resided thereafter at Chateau de Plessis, Sainte Antoine du Roches, France. Left France permanently, returned to New York in May 1931. Resided on Long Island and in New York City.

1932-1936 Lived in Casa Genotta (the Castle of Gene and Carlotta), built to specifications on Sea Island, Georgia. Overwork brought on near-breakdown in 1934, which compelled several months' rest.

1936-1943 Lived in Seattle, in San Francisco, and in Tao House, Chinese-style mansion built to specifications on 158-acre estate in Contra Costa County, California. Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in November 1936. In July 1943, daughter Oona married famed film comedian Charlie Chaplin. Her age, eighteen, his, fifty-four, the same as O'Neill's. O'Neill never forgave her and eventually disinherited her, along with his derelict son Shane and all their issue.

1944-1945 Moved back to San Francisco. Suffered permanently injurious paralytic stroke. Moved to New York in October 1945.

1946-1948 Lived in New York and Marblehead, Massachusetts. Brief return to stage in New York production of *The Iceman Cometh*.

1948-1950 In extremely ill health, lived in virtual seclusion in Marblehead. Eugene, Jr., committed suicide in September 1950, death a profound shock to O'Neill.

1951-1953 After charges and countercharges of cruelty and incompetence involving Miss Monterey, couple become reconciled and disposed of Marblehead home. Moved to Boston. During this period, most of remaining plays were destroyed.

1953 Died in Boston on November 27. Official cause: bronchial pneumonia. Interred in Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston on December 2.

## SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR INVESTIGATION AND REPORT

*For use with text material*

1 Throughout his career O'Neill had his strong defenders and detractors, and even at the height of his career he never could muster unanimous praise from all the major critics. Every play was liked by some critics and disliked by others, and their opinions were expressed in very definite terms.

a Trace the pattern of *favorable criticism* of O'Neill from the earliest one-act plays through *Days Without End*. What are the major points cited for praise? What advice is given to O'Neill to improve his good points? Is there a particular aspect of his work that consistently receives praise?

b Trace the pattern of *favorable criticism* in the same manner from the first production of *The Iceman Cometh* to the present. Did O'Neill's absence make any difference in the

critics' attitudes? Do they seem to find a "new" or "the same old" O'Neill after his return?

c Trace the developing pattern of *adverse criticism* for the same periods and in the same general manner as suggested in (a) and (b). Does the condemnation increase or decrease in intensity? Is there grudging admiration on the whole, despite the unfavorable comments?

2 An artist who attempts a "comeback," as O'Neill did with *The Iceman Cometh*, is always in grave danger of failing completely or of being only a quick reminder of the past before again fading away. Show how the critics responded to O'Neill's later plays, starting with *The Iceman Cometh*, in terms of their evaluation of the playwright as a literary artist of permanent worth. Do those who condemned the plays in the early days later find them worthy of praise? Are the same things praised and condemned by different critics? Are there important references back to the earlier plays? What is said of the future of the works as stage pieces or as literature?

3 Interesting critical contrasts can be gained by comparing the opening night reviews of a play with those written later in the play's run, without the pressure of newspaper deadlines. Evaluate the general effectiveness of the hastily written opening night criticisms of a chosen number of plays. Are the critics who wrote later generally more or less understanding of the playwright's effort (see the longer articles)? Do they dwell upon the same matters, or are points of a different nature discussed in the different types of review?

✓4 O'Neill considered himself to be a writer of tragedy. Does the general pattern of criticism bear out his contention? Where do the critics find that he succeeds or fails? What do they suggest for improvement? Do they feel that modern tragedy is possible today, in terms of what O'Neill tries to do?

*For use with text and plays*

1 Read an O'Neill play from each of the chronological groupings. Summarize the critical opinions relating to these specific plays (in both opening night and later reviews) and evaluate the critics' judgments in terms of your own understanding of the plays. Show where you believe the critics help the reader, hinder his understanding, or even miss the point of the plays entirely.

2 Read *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, and *The Great God Brown*, the highly experimental plays that brought O'Neill much of his early fame. Treat these plays as suggested in (1) above, but be sure to incorporate pertinent comments from longer essays written before 1934, such as those by Quinn, Hofmannsthal, de Casseres, and Kemelman. Opinions of the later revival of *The Great God Brown* might also be included.

3 Read *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and one other play of the revival period after 1956. Treat these plays as suggested in (1) above, being sure to use later essays by Krutch, Bentley, and others, especially the anonymous "Counsels of Despair."

*For use with library references*

1 Take one or two important O'Neill plays (including one you may have studied in your classwork) and see how many more reviews you can find in your library. Evaluate the reviews in terms of the periodicals in which they appear. How does a daily newspaper differ in its approach from other kinds of publication, such as *Theatre Arts*? Make whatever comparisons or contrasts you can among the various approaches of different publications.

2 If your library has *The New York Times*, choose any period of O'Neill's career and read the reviews of his plays in that newspaper. Compare the approach of such critics as Woolcott and Atkinson, who wrote for the *Times*, with the other comments available in this book. Be sure to consult opening night reviews as well as the later articles in the Sunday theatre supplements.

3 Read one of the good biographies of O'Neill suggested in the bibliography. Determine how aware the critics were of the biographical nature of the early sea plays and the early longer plays such as *Beyond the Horizon*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *The Great God Brown*. How wrong were some of the ideas of the critics about these plays? How nearly correct were they?

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